

MAY 1998

# interZone

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131



## 'The Secret of My Success'

Paul J. McAuley

an interview with

Molly Brown

plus stories by

Madeleine Cary

Stephen Dedman

Thomas M. Disch

Alexander Glass

Don Webb

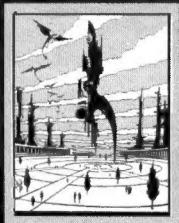


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WAS THE WORD,  
AND THE  
WORD WAS  
VOYAGER



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May 1998

science fiction & fantasy

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# Interaction + Interaction + Interaction +

Dear Editors:

I thought that Gary Westfahl raised some interesting points in "Why The Stars Are Silent" (*Interzone* 128). However, recently American astronomers Joseph Lazio, James Cordes and the late Carl Sagan, in *Astronomy and Geophysics*, have attributed a lack of success in picking up extraterrestrial radio signals to irregularities in interstellar ionized gasses. Any signals that we do get are distorted, and the suppressing or occasionally magnifying effects make it very unlikely that we can get a lengthy or re-occurring artificial signal. Unless we throw a lot more effort into listening than we do at present, we are unlikely to get any meaningful results. At the moment it is a bit like us Brits expecting, with the fortunate aid of mirages, to pick up semaphore signals that prove that there is civilized life on the other side of the Atlantic.

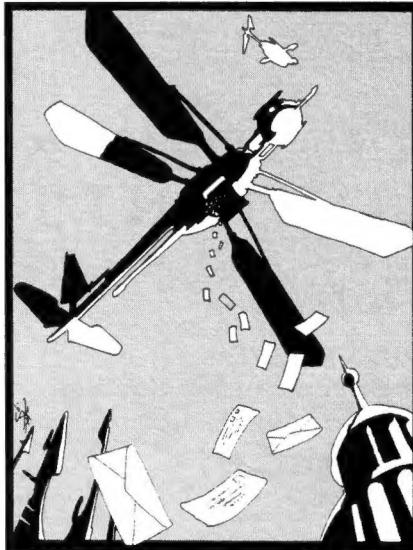
Recent discoveries both inside and outside the Solar System, however, do suggest that the universe could be awash with life. This doesn't necessarily mean that there is much in the way of *intelligent* life out there. The history of life on our planet suggests that evolution is no more likely than devolution. There are plenty of fossil examples of creatures becoming less complex, never mind hitting the dead-end of extinction. The perception of the upward struggle of evolution is largely an illusion caused by the fact that the earliest creatures were, by necessity, the simplest forms possible and were unable to devolve. Most of the life on Earth is still of the same type, and us larger beasties are merely statistical noise. I would recommend Stephen Jay Gould's *Life's Grandeur* for those who wish a more eloquent and reasoned statement of this argument than I can manage.

In the meantime, anyone for an Asimovian one-species galaxy?

**Jim Steel**  
Glasgow

Dear Editors:

I think it is time someone did a robust rebuttal of Gary Westfahl's articles which have appeared recently in *Interzone*. I don't think I am the man for the job, partly because I work too slowly, and partly because I am not sufficiently knowledgeable. The ideal writer to reply to the first piece would have been Brian Aldiss, but this is not the time to worry him with such trivialities. Another might be Brian Stableford, whose knowledge of the field seems almost bottomless. In addition, Sta-



bleford is a practitioner on both sides of the divide, being both a reliable storyteller and a perceptive reviewer. I think Kim Newman and/or Eugene Byrne should be asked to respond to the diatribe against them on the subject of alternate history. Having made a modest contribution to this sub-genre myself I might, at another time, say something about my own reasons for doing so.

Frankly I am puzzled that one of the field's most consistently radical magazines should waste space printing the opinions of the most reactionary critic ever to misunderstand and misinterpret science fiction and all its tributaries. I can only conclude that you wanted to start an argument. His narrow view of the aims and possibilities of speculative fiction, coupled with his *ex-cathedra* manner of delivery, is intensely irritating. A few years ago he did a series of articles for *Foundation*, which aroused comments from Messrs Aldiss and Stableford. He attempted to refute these learned gentlemen, largely on the false assumption that he knew better than they, and then restated his antediluvian views.

While I uphold the principles of free speech, I also believe that anyone who tries to present ignorance of a subject as a form of special knowledge is guilty of Philistinism.

**Stuart Falconer**  
Newcastle-on-Tyne

Dear Editors:

I am writing to say "bravo" to Gary Westfahl for his article "Greys in the Lensmen" (*IZ* 129). I think he has neatly defined why I don't find most alternate histories very satisfying. They're too easy. They're another version of *Star Trek*, something which

works by comfy manipulation of the familiar. (And, indeed, *Star Trek* had popular episodes in which such familiar persons as Genghis Khan, Abraham Lincoln, Jack the Ripper, and the Greek god Apollo turned up.) I once cynically suggested to the assistant to a Certain Anthologist that "vampires are really popular and alternate histories are popular, so why don't you do a book called *Alternate Vampires*, in which various famous people from the past, Elvis or Shakespeare or Attila the Hun, are vampires?" I was kidding. I thought I was making up the silliest thing imaginable. But the fellow said to me with an absolutely straight face, "Well, we've already got a book pretty close to that. Maybe in another year we'll consider it."

The one anthology I'd like to get into would be the reducto-ad-absurdum version called *Alternate Historical Vampire Cat Detectives*. I have this great idea for a story about how Sherlock Holmes's cat defeated Count Dracula's cat in a scheme to depose the rightful King James VI and replace him by the Hanoverian pretender Victoria. The naughty version, *Alternate Historical Vampire Cat Detective Erotica*, is probably beyond me. My chaste Catholic upbringing inhibits me...

But seriously, I think Westfahl is dead-on which he suggests that alternate histories are primarily the sport of the old and the tired. They are strictly a print phenomenon because the general (American, at least) public is too a-historical to know or care whether or not Joan of Arc won at Waterloo. However, there are, I think, a handful of alternate historical stories and novels which have some validity as art, as literature if you will, or even as science fiction. Keith Roberts's *Pavane* and Philip Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* come to mind immediately. I would also add Ward Moore's *Bring the Jubilee*, Kingsley Amis's *The Alteration*, and Stephen Vincent Benet's "The Curfew Tolls." This last is, I think, the best single alternate-history short story ever written.

What I notice about all of these is that not only do they predate the current crop, but they're not actually *about* alternate historical events as much as they are about what the changes *mean*. A story which speculates how the Battle of Gettysburg might have turned out differently if General-so-and-so had slept late from a hangover is basically a schematic diagram, of interest to aging war-gamers. But the really good alternate historical stories have much larger thematic concerns. Sometimes they

# Interaction + Interaction + Interaction +

are satirical, showing us what certain things mean in our society by taking those things away. *Bring the Jubilee* is not so much about an alternate past, but what was (when the book was published) an alternate present resulting from that past. While the book contains many of the tropes of a standard post-holocaust juvenile of the period, it does make the reader consider what American society is and how it got that way, and the novel is not a frivolous game. Similarly, the Benet story is about the Great Man Theory of History. In it, Napoleon was born a generation too early, and is encountered in retirement, frustrated because he never really got a chance to exercise his talents. The punch at the end is that the story takes place on the day on which (in our history) the Bastille fell. In the story, nothing much happened that day.

And of course Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* is about the nature of reality, and too well known to need explication here. That's the real key to it. The best alternate histories are thematically driven. They require the alternate-historical canvas to illustrate some larger matter. They don't go from the alternate history to the story, but from the story to the alternate history.

Westfahl should be careful about offhand remarks about Shakespeare-as-werewolf. If he's not careful, an anthology could result...

**Darrell Schweitzer**  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Dear Editors:

I read Gary Westfahl's essay on Brian Stableford and John Clute (IZ 130) with dismay. Mr Westfahl is entitled to take issue with Messrs Clute & Stableford on the basis of evidence, analysis or conclusion, but surely not on the basis of where they were born.

Science fiction's origins were culturally diverse, and it seems to me its present and future are increasingly so. Maybe we ought to be big enough to welcome that diversity rather than fear it. Xenophobia has no place in sf, or in the pages of *Interzone*.

**Stephen Baxter**  
Great Missenden, Bucks.

Dear Editors:

In issue 129's "Interface" reference was made to *Odyssey* and *Scheherazade* — two magazines which I have not managed to trace. I wonder if you could supply an address for each of them?

**Pete Wild**  
Leeds

**Editor:** The address for *Odyssey* (edited by Liz Holliday) is c/o Partizan Press, 816-818 Leigh-on-Sea, Essex SS9 3NH. The address for *Scheherazade* (edited by Elizabeth Counihan) is 14 Queens Park Rise, Brighton BN2 2ZF.

Dear Editors:

I would like to thank Messrs Moorcock and Petty for their replies (*Interzone* 128) to my outpouring of bile over the manner of publication of M. John Harrison's *Signs of Life*. I shall now lapse into a thoughtful silence on the subject. Which leaves me a letter to complete and nothing to moan about.

Having enjoyed readers' reviews of science-fiction novels by "mainstream" authors I am prompted to write one of my own. I admit, however, that Russell Hoban is difficult to fit into any literary pigeonhole, and this may be something that contributes to his novel *Fremder* being such a fresh and individual experience. I realize that you may already have reviewed it yourselves back in 1996 when it first appeared [we did: Paul McAuley reviewed it in issue 108 — Ed.], but my subscription doesn't reach back that far, so I hope I'm not merely raking over cold ashes.

*Fremder* is a hard sf novel. Although it contains many of the political and social preoccupations so frequent in "snob-back"-format literary fantasies, the central precept that informs this dystopia is an imaginative step taken from Quantum Physics. Hoban's science, however, is delivered with absolute authority and clarity, so that an uninitiated arts graduate like myself wasn't worried by it.

The novel teases. On the surface it appears to be a man's search for himself and his attempt to recall, and learn from, a traumatic experience. You also know, while this is going on, that there are several Weighty Subjects behind it all, humming to them-

selves quietly and waiting to pounce. I did not, however, find the novel pretentious or pompous.

Where sf novels of ideas sometimes fall down is in characterization. There is little point painstakingly detailing an alien society if one is only to people it with cardboard cutouts. Hoban is able to bring moments of exquisite joy, tenderness and pathos to even the most bizarre of situations. This is all aided by his sparing but uncompromisingly vivid prose that illuminates while, at the same time having immense amounts of fun with the English language. His creation of Fragic, a fractured and singsong derivative of English, is as plausible as it is thrilling to read.

I could have mentioned other writers in connection with this novel, all excellent authors who share elements of style or theme with Hoban — Geoff Ryman, Samuel Delany, Jonathan Carroll, and of course Mike Harrison (lest we forget) but to do so would lessen his achievement. One final note, however. The end is just a little too neat.

**David Burrows**  
Camberley, Surrey

Dear Editors:

For the *Interzone* annual poll, here's my list of stories particularly liked:

"The Black Blood of the Dead"  
by Brian Stableford (#115 & 116)

"Everywhen"  
by Dominic Green (#118)

"A Spy in Europa"  
by Alastair Reynolds (#120)

"The Cobain Sweater"  
by Paul Di Filippo (#120)

"Thigmoo" by Eugene Byrne (#120)

"The Cozumel Incident"  
by Dominic Green (#121)

"The Grass Princess"  
by Gwyneth Jones (#122)

"Orphanogenesis"  
by Greg Egan (#123) — the best of the year; Minsky's *Society of Mind* and Dennett's *Consciousness Explained* rolled up into a short story: a piece of genuinely speculative sf which deserves to become a classic.

"The Fubar Suit"  
by Stephen Baxter (#123)

"Write Me" by D. G. Valdron (#124)

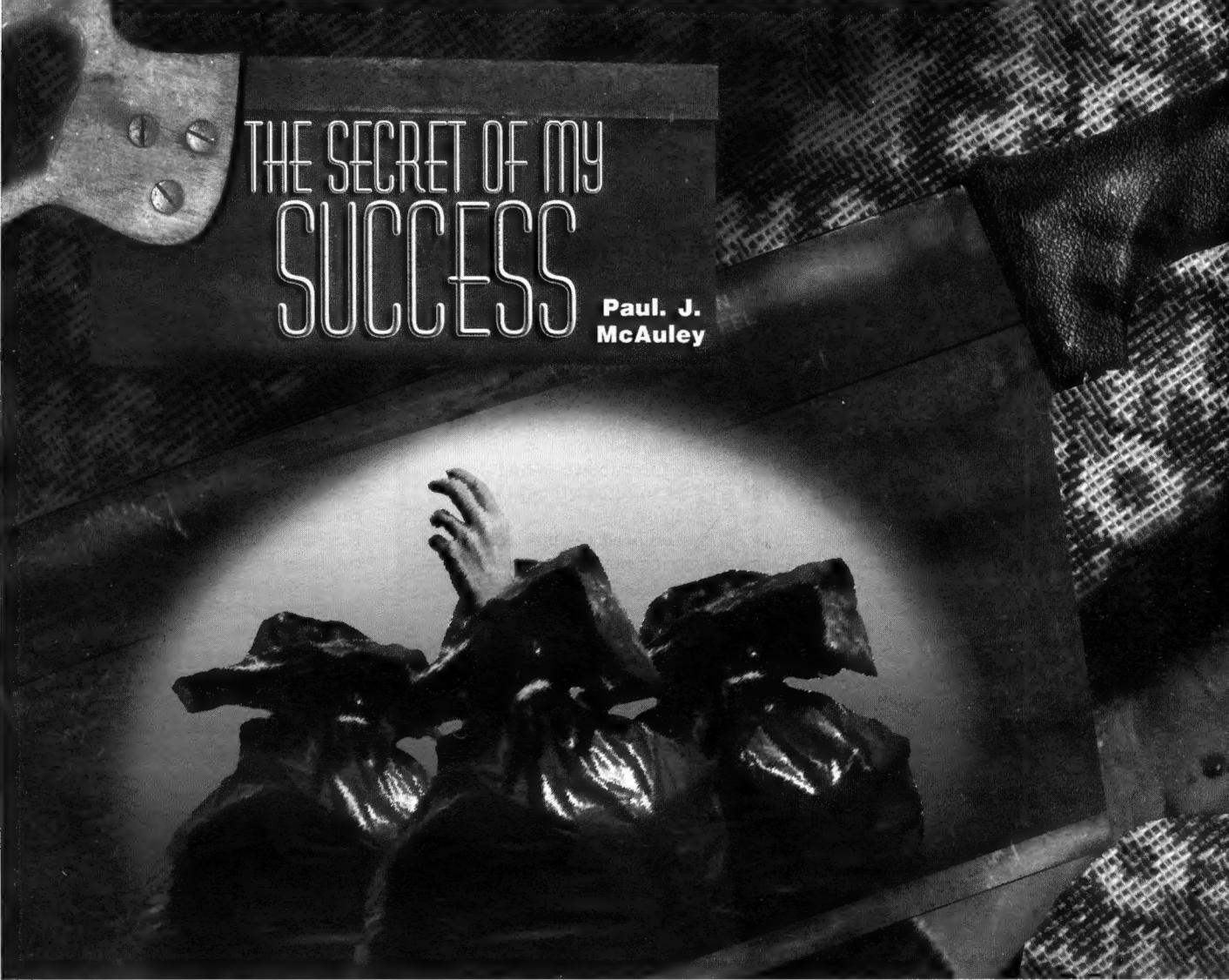
"The Happy Valley at the End of the World" by Paul Di Filippo (#125)

**Paul Western**

## Apologies...

...to Tanith Lee for perpetuating a pseudo-biographical "factoid" in our brief note following her story in *Interzone* 128 (page 26). It seems that Tanith's father is *not* the actor Bernard Lee: this is just a rumour which has appeared in print before and which we foolishly accepted as true without checking.

— The Editor



# THE SECRET OF MY SUCCESS

Paul. J.  
McAuley

**M**urder was easier than I had thought it would be, even though Mark had been one of my friends. Cutting up his body was worse than actually killing him, but once I set my mind to it, it was only hard work rather than something disgusting.

Mark had owned a good range of barely used kitchen knives, but none, not even the big Chinese cleaver, were up to the job of jointing him. The tenon saw I found soon clogged its teeth with flesh and gristle; I broke three hacksaw blades on the big bones of his legs and had to shower and get dressed and go out, slightly hysterical, and buy more from the ironmongers around the corner on Brewer Street. I bought a cold chisel and a mallet, too, and a roll of twine and a pack of strong, green binliners. If you want a job done right, get the right tools for the job.

After I had finished, and showered again (I'd done the butchery naked, in Mark's white-tile and chrome bathroom, out of practical considerations) and dressed, I redeemed my BMW from the nearby NCP car park and loaded Mark's bled-out arms, legs, head and torso, wrapped in six pairs of binliners tied up with twine, into its boot. Although it was late in the evening, there were still plenty of people about in Soho, but not one spared me a second glance, even when I worked up a sweat wrestling Mark's heavy torso, in its slippery green wrapping, from doorway to car.

It occurred to me that the butchery wasn't strictly

necessary; the police would find traces of blood no matter how much I wiped down the tiles. But they wouldn't know for sure that Mark had been killed, and it was good practice. I planned to kill again.

Have you ever read H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*? If you have, once I have told you the story of my success you'll know why I did it. You'll know that it wasn't really murder when I killed Mark. It was the first blow in the war between us and them.

It doesn't matter how much money you have: you always need more. You climb the jagged slope of your career, trampling on the hands of lesser competitors, busting a gut or busting your heart, shedding a marriage or two if necessary, and when you get there, when you reach the top and think you'll enjoy a clean uncluttered view high above those less fortunate, less gifted, or merely less ruthless than yourself, you see that you've merely climbed the first foothill of an endless range of mountains, and each is surmounted by smug bastards who seemed to have got there effortlessly, parachuting in with the help of Mummy's money or Daddy's connections. Who aren't even aware that you exist.

But at first, my own success was nothing but a series of lovely surprises.

At school, I'd always been good at both English and Science. Science was what I liked working at; the English thing was like a sixth finger, a freakish talent.



Illustrations by Dominic Harman

I was always top of the class in English, but I was useless at other languages (those in the top stream of English at the public school where I had a scholarship were supposed to do Latin, but I was so bad at it I was demoted to metalwork) and all the rest of the arts curriculum. I was a science bug who could write. I managed to argue my way into doing English, Biology and Chemistry A-Levels at school, and then went on to do a zoology degree at Oxford because they didn't mind my rag-bag of qualifications. When I got my First, I toyed with the idea of doing a Ph.D, but couldn't see how I'd find time for the novel I really wanted to write.

So I came to London and knocked around doing the usual freelance jobs, reviewing and interviewing for listings magazines, doing capsule reports of Bolivian and Thai horror movies for *Sight and Sound*, writing mind-numbing corporate pamphlets and PR leaflets, tidying up abysmally literal translations of Korean electronics manuals. I worked every night and weekend on The Novel, which soon turned out to be not as good as I first thought. And then, in an unemployed spell, I wrote another novel in eight weeks flat, a fat thriller about a computer expert who becomes entangled in a series of Internet-related murders and a political scandal, and I was accepted onto the roster of the first agent I tried.

And that's where my success really started.

Anne Shapiro was one of the top three literary agents in London. For some strange reason she approved of me

at our first meeting, an exhausting inquisition in which she covered everything from my family background to my medical history, concluding at last that I had "potential." The quote-marks are hers; she talked not in English, but in heavily inflected Irony.

Anne was an American who had come over to London in the Swinging 60s. She had married a chemical industry baron in the 70s, had been widowed in the 80s, and had made herself a millionaire in the 90s. She was five foot nothing with a bob of silver-blonde hair, so thin that you could see every bone in her face, and given to wearing well-tailored silk trouser suits and lots of silver jewellery. Although she seemed as fragile as cut glass, she had the vocabulary of a Liverpool docker with Tourette syndrome and the tenacity of a pit-bull terrier. She frightened the shit out of editors, who in London still fondly believe that publishing is a gentleman's game. At the start of face-to-face negotiations she would light a fat cigar with a diameter bigger than her wrist, daring the person on the other side of the desk or the restaurant table to ask her to put it out. No one ever did, not even the Hollywood producer we met in LA when we were flown out to meet the lovely people who had given us a large amount of money for the movie rights.

With Anne Shapiro on my side, the novel was the subject of mildly intensive bidding wars amongst publishers on both sides of the Atlantic. It did well in hardback and sold to 15 other countries, including Finland

and North Korea. The British paperback sales were good, reaching a fifth printing. Meanwhile, Anne secured me a contract with a TV production company to turn it into a six part series. And just as I was polishing the final draft of the scripts, a few weeks before production started on the TV series, Anne sold the movie rights after a three-way auction. The option money for the winning contract was ridiculously generous, and it was given a green light for the fast track into production. Of course, I had to come up with a new plot, because the movie people liked the character but didn't want to remake the TV series, and I had to translate everything into an LA setting, but I was encouraged by the six-figure advance and the promise of much more when the movie was made.

My fiancée and I (it was mostly my money, but Jane did the hard work of dealing with estate agents and solicitors) bought a house at the edge of Primrose Hill, and we spent the same amount of money kitting it out. We bought a BMW B3 Alpina and a sporty little Mazda. Jane planned to give up her job (she was a PR flak in my publishers, which is where we had met) when we got married. I had my own newsgroup on the Internet, alt.fan.oliver-slater. Everything should have been lovely.

But of course it could have been even more lovely, and that was the problem. As anyone who lives in London knows, location is everything. Primrose Hill is very nice, a village-style community full of actors and writers aspiring to middle-class bohemianism, with a beautiful park commanding views of central London as its hub. But our house was only on the edge of Primrose Hill, within sound if not sight of the railway junction at Chalk Farm, and because we had no garage, we had to keep our cars on the overcrowded street. Soon after we moved, the cherry red paint of my BMW was keyed all the way down the offside; it cost £600 to get it resprayed. The people in the house opposite had obviously entered some sort of competition for the title *Worst Neighbours From Hell*, and by regular use of a high-powered sound system into the small hours of the morning were comfortably ensconced in the semi-finals. There was human vomit and dog shit (and once what looked like human shit) on the pavements. One morning, Jane opened the front door to find that a greasy-clothed, linoleum-skinned tramp had decided to make a kind of tent of cardboard and lice-ridden blankets on our doorstep. Primrose Hill was nice enough for the moment, but there were even nicer places.

The exclusive square of double-fronted mansions in Kensington, for instance, where we went to an exclusive party for which Anne had passed on a couple of invites, and where things started going wrong.

Jane and I arrived in a slightly odd mood, a hangover from an argument we hadn't quite managed to have a few days before, after Anne had treated us to a delightful dinner at Damien Hirst's new restaurant, The Pharmacy. Jane and I had told Anne about our marriage plans, and Anne had urged us not to rush into having children.

"It doesn't pay to make too many life changes at once," she had said, fixing us with her ice-blue gaze over her glass of Puligny Montrachet. "You should wait a couple of years. Three at the most. You won't be disappointed."

Afterwards, Jane and I had not quite had our argu-

ment. One of the reasons we were getting married was because we both wanted children, and Jane, bless her, was unbendingly conventional in this area. She felt that Anne's remarks slighted her.

"She's taking over our lives," she said. "She has no right."

I tried to be reasonable. I tried not to take sides. All the usual mistake blokes make in confrontations like this. Because of course the argument was really about territory. It was about *me*.

We were getting ready for bed. I was half-drunk, and halfway out of my trousers. I said tentatively, "Well, she is responsible for a lot of the lovely things that have been happening."

Jane gave me a hard, brittle look. I added hastily, "But of course that gives her no right to interfere. It's just how she is. She means well."

"You should start the novel you're always talking about," Jane said. "You were a novelist before she took you up."

The problem seemed to be that I had not taken off my shoes before trying to take off my trousers. I said, "Before I met Anne, I was an unpublished novelist."

"It would have been published without your help," Jane said. "Now, instead of a career, you're doing endless revisions of the same thing."

I had managed to pull my shoelaces into a hard knot. I said, "It pays well."

"Exactly," Jane said. "You're the one who earns money for Anne, not the other way around. Why do you think she made you take that medical before she signed you up? She was making sure you weren't going to drop dead, that you were a good long-term investment. What's in her best interest isn't necessarily in *your* best interest, sweetheart. She just sees the enemy of promise in the hall, and loss of her ten per cent."

"The enemy...?"

"The enemy of promise is the pram in the hall," Jane said. "Cyril Connolly." She had an English degree, and could effortlessly trump me in literary matters. She added, "She doesn't even have children of her own. It's well known that she married for money, but was cheated out of it when her husband spent it all on freezing himself."

And so on. Jane was trying to provoke me into defending Anne, so that she could accuse me of taking sides against *her*, so that we could have a real argument. I managed to dance around her jabs, and although nothing more was said, it was still smouldering away, like a fire in a tyre dump, when we arrived at the party.

It was given by another of Anne's clients, Tom Rose, author of several enormous bestsellers about an Englishman who worked for the CIA. One had just been made into a movie, with Patrick Stewart as the lead, and there was talk that this would be the first of a series of big budget action thrillers.

Rose came from a family which had been in law for about 200 years, and his wife was a Conservative MP; he was establishment in a way I could never be, as quickly became clear at the party. A flunkie in a 17th-century frock coat, breeches and a powdered wig greeted us at the door. Our coats and the bottle of champagne which I'd insisted on bringing against Jane's advice, still in its Oddbins bag, were whisked away. Another flunkie

led us up a sweeping staircase, with two chandeliers burning high above, to a vast ballroom with mirrored walls where the party was in full swing.

There were two bars, waitresses circulating with food on silver trays, a twelve piece string orchestra, a mountain of shaved ice with foothills of caviar and streams of vodka, and naked people painted to look like statues standing in decorative poses in various alcoves. As for the guests... Jane dresses well, and she was wearing a new Ghost slip dress she had bought for the occasion, but every woman there was wearing either Prada, Westwood, Chanel, or (Jane told me later) unique creations from the new designer's store in Fulham, which was so select that only members of its exclusive club could shop there. And while I was wearing a brand new pistachio-hued Armani suit, all the other men in the room were wearing dinner jackets and white tie. Clearly, everyone knew everyone else, and they seemed to belong to a different species, one made out of a better kind of flesh. The women were as elegant as swans, the men hale and hearty, and muscular in all the right places. Everyone had healthy tans, immaculate coiffures and rows of gleaming white teeth which they showed constantly. I have good teeth – I have never needed a filling – but everyone here looked as if they'd spent half a million pounds on getting theirs snowy white and even.

I have a traditional background for a writer: a solid, provincial, and utterly conventional lower middle class family. My father was a railway clerk and my mother spent all her energy keeping our little two-up two-down immaculate. We had lived in Derby, and I had escaped via a scholarship to the local public school to Oxford. You'd think I would have been overjoyed to have found myself a guest of a party like that, even if I did stand out like a parrot amongst a flock of penguins, but was I fuck. Although I had been looking forward to having a lovely time, the undercurrents of our ongoing non-argument were now running strongly through my mind, darkened by resentful envy towards all of the effortlessly immaculate people around me. Not only that, but there was no sign of Anne, and while we knew many of the other guests, it was only because we had seen them on TV, or in the fashion magazines, or in the movies.

While Jane turned this way and that, exclaiming how well-preserved this 50-year-old pop star looked, or how slender and unreal that supermodel was, I started drinking too much. I was coming back from the bar with two more gin and tonics, ready to make the sensible proposal that we should wait ten more minutes and see if Anne would turn up, and then beat it to the Groucho Club, when I saw that Jane was talking with the editor of a glossy men's magazine she had been lobbying to run a book extract. From the way she was nodding intently, I knew that they were talking business, and rather than interrupt I downed one of the G&Ts, set the empty glass on the tray of a passing waitress, and turned and pushed through the crowd to search for the loo.

In the marble-walled hall, there was a reassuring knot of men standing around the door of the bathroom, although none of them were drunk (and none of them were carrying a drink; unlike all the other parties I had ever been to, drinking was not the main agenda here), and none of them seemed as desperate for a slash as me. As soon as I had decided to duck out, my bladder



had swollen by some kind of sympathetic magic to the size of a grapefruit. They looked like a set of extras in a Merchant-Ivory film, casually chatting while waiting for the next shot – and then I realised that one of them had actually been the second lead in the last but one Merchant-Ivory film. One of them said something about *telomeres*, and then they looked at me and fell silent, no doubt wondering why some nutter in a green suit had wandered in off the street.

I was just plucking up the courage to barge through them when someone put a hand on my shoulder and said, “You made it.”

It was one of my friends, Mark Ellis. We’d met at Oxford and we’d kept in touch after we’d moved down to London, although I hadn’t seen him in more than a year. His hair had been receding then, and he had been rounding out from too many business lunches, but now he looked as spruce as the rest of the guests, tanned and relaxed in a dinner jacket and kilt – he was one quarter Scottish, and wore a kilt at every possible social occasion. His hair was thick and glossy and black, pulled back in a ponytail that, unusually, looked stylish and uncontrived.

“Thank God there’s someone here I know,” I said. “I feel like a gatecrasher. Anne wangled me an invite but she isn’t here.”

“Well, she got in on the ground floor, of course. I must say you’ve got guts, wearing that suit.”

“And you can fuck right off, too. No one told me it was a dinner jacket affair.”

“And where is the lovely Jane?”

“Oh, sucking off some tosser of a magazine editor.”

Mark laughed. He’d had his teeth straightened and polished. “Oh, you needn’t worry about networking at this kind of bash. It’s neutral territory. Outside, of course, we’re all at each other’s throats, but not here.”

We talked for a couple of minutes, catching up. I commented on his tan, and he said that he’d been in LA for a couple of weeks. I told him about the movie deal and the script I was trying to write, and he told me that he was employing 20 people in his company now, and maybe they’d get to do some work on my movie. It was a nice, grown-up conversation. Then someone ascending the stairs called to him and he glanced at his wafer-thin Patek Philippe watch and said he had to see some people; I assumed he was off to do a couple of lines of coke or something similar. In a way, I was right.

“I’m really pleased you made it, kiddo,” he said. “I’ll give you a call.”

And that’s what he did the very next day, suggesting brightly that I come and visit him on Sunday; we could watch a new print of *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* he’d borrowed from the NFT in his company’s private screening room.

“You still have a thing for Powell and Pressburger, don’t you?”

“Sure. I mean, yes. Yes, it would be cool. Let’s do it.”

I was nursing a killer hangover, and it was one of the brain-grey, brain-dead November days that are the curse of London winters. I’d carried on drinking at the party, moving from relatively harmless gin and tonics (full of health-giving minerals, quinine and, thanks to the lime slice, vitamin C), to brandy. I didn’t really remember the

taxis ride back, and had a vague idea that I had thrown up when we’d got home. Jane had left for work without waking me; she was away for five days, shepherding a retired cricketer around Britain on a publicity tour for his autobiography (called oxymorically and inaccurately (since it had been written by a hack for a tenth of the cricketer’s advance), *My Autobiography*). I spent all day on the sofa, watching crap cable TV and feeling sorry for myself, instead of working on the script.

I was still liverish the next day, and as I left the house for Mark’s I discovered that a dog, clearly an unfeasibly large dog, had shat copiously on the doorstep, voiding itself of the result of a diet consisting exclusively of curry vindaloo. A number of people, perhaps the crowd that inevitably would have gathered to look at this wonder of nature, had spread the stinky muck all over the pavement. The odour lingered in the car, suggesting that despite my tip-toe care I’d somehow managed to transfer some of the shit to my shoes.

I was skirting Regent’s Park when my cell phone rang. It was Anne; she asked if I would mind popping into her office. I cheered up at once. The last time we’d had an impromptu meeting was when she had given me the good news about the rights auction which had resulted in the movie deal. I found a parking space right outside her building, bounded up the stairs to her office suite and went straight in; because it was Sunday there was no one in the reception room, with its squishy sofa and well-lit display case with specimens of the books of Anne’s clients, including my first and so far only novel, racked on perspex stands.

Anne was standing by the window, some kind of spray canister jammed in her left nostril. She sniffed hugely and turned and saw me, said that she was suffering from hayfever, and calmly stowed the canister in the mini-fridge in the corner. We didn’t sit down; the meeting only lasted five minutes. The news was not good.

“There’s a problem,” she said, “with the studio. They’ve put the project on the backburner.”

“But I thought they were fast-tracking it. The last time we talked, they were going to start casting. I thought –”

Anne dismissed this with a wave of her hand. “They’ve got some shit-hot new project. Fuck-ups like this happen all the time. Don’t worry about it. You still have the option money.”

“I was rather counting on the rest,” I said. I wanted to sit down because I wasn’t sure if I had the energy both to remain standing and to maintain the fixed grin which had taken residence on my face. The thing with movie deals is that everyone knows about the big, headline-grabbing total, but you only get the full amount if the movie is made. The problem was that I had been counting on getting that full amount so that I could pay off the huge mortgage on the house.

There was worse news: I still had to write the script. That was part of the deal, it seemed; I had already been paid for it, and the movie people wanted their pound of flesh. And to be honest, I hadn’t really done very much work on the script. I was tired of writing the same thing over and over again.

I tried to tell Anne about the novel I wanted to write, thinking that at least I could get an advance for it. It wouldn’t pay off the mortgage, but it would reduce it enough so that Jane’s salary could cover the payments

– and I wondered how I was going to tell Jane that she couldn't quit her job after all.

The idea had excited me when it had first arrived – a big, roomy novel describing the rise of the media elite in the 80s and their success or failure in the 90s – but now it sounded trite. Anne had turned to look out at the view of Russell Square, its field of muddy grass with red buses crawling along one side under the bare winter trees, and when at last I fell silent, she nodded without looking around.

"I'm sure we can sell it somewhere," she said, "but remember that your strength is in the thriller genre, Oliver. The secret of success is to find something that works and stick with it as long as possible. You have good genes. I'm sure you can redeem yourself. Think about it."

And so I wasn't at my best when I arrived at the offices of Mark's company, which had expanded into a smart building on Soho Square. It specialised in digital post production, and had benefited from the trend for ever bigger and better explosions and stunts demanded by American blockbuster movies. It could add computer generated virtual actors in crowd scenes, enhance or simulate explosions, lay snow over a landscape or add breath-smoke in scenes where actors were supposed to be talking in freezing air. Soon enough there would be no principal photography at all, Mark said, and let drop that on paper he was a multi-millionaire.

"Of course, if I actually wanted the money, I would have to sell all this."

"All this" was three floors of open plan offices full of workstations crammed with the latest hardware; even a Cray supercomputer. Even though it was a Sunday, one or two people were at work. They greeted Mark cheerfully; clearly, he was a good boss. And a good friend, too. I had briefly thought of going home, and the only reason I'd come here was that I couldn't face the idea of being on my own. If Mark noticed that I was a bit withdrawn, he didn't comment, and made sure that I felt right at home.

We watched *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* in the screening room, then over to Mark's loft on Great Pulteney Street, where we played pool and drank a delightful brand of Czech lager I'd never heard of before, and then, in a spirit of postmodern irony, ate a Thai take-out and watched a hardcore porn video, *Edward Penishands*, he'd brought back from a recent trip to New York. In the middle of the various jiggling penetrations, and while Mark was off having a slash, I went over to the big red Westinghouse fridge to get another beer. And as I rummaged around, I found a slim grey canister just like the one I'd caught Anne using.

I was, to be frank, pissed. We'd had a few drinks while watching the film, and we'd smoked a couple of joints, too. And while playing pool I'd been drinking at least twice as fast as Mark. On impulse, with the hazy notion that it might be some kind of designer drug, I sprayed some up my right nostril. I just had time to register an oily, faintly bitter scent before I heard Mark coming back. Instead of putting the spray back in the fridge, I dropped it into my pocket.

I watched the rest of the video in a state of anticipation, wondering when the high would kick in, and what it might be like, but nothing happened. I went home half-



cut and horny, and got all maudlin with Jane over the phone, pretending to be scandalised when she told me that the cricketer, currently appearing in a breakfast cereal commercial with his family, had brought along an 18-year-old girlfriend for company. I suggested that I could drive up to York tomorrow, but Jane said that after a signing and a radio interview they were straight over to Bradford and then on to Manchester, where there would be another radio interview and a long evening signing session. "I'll be back on Wednesday, sweets," she said. "Remember to do the washing up."

I found the spray canister the next day, when I was hanging up my jacket. On top of a hangover, I felt like I had come down with flu: scratchy throat, aching joints, unpleasant bouts of sweating and shivering. The ends of my fingers and toes hurt too, as if someone had inserted powdered glass under the nails.

Now I did what I should have done before. I read the list of contents printed on a square white label which was stuck to the base of the canister, next to a barcode strip.

*TRC1, HAPa, SGSih, WRN3 retroviruses. Human lysosomal base. Keep refrigerated.*

I didn't know what the alphabet soup was, but I knew about retroviruses. Everyone knows about retroviruses. HIV, which causes AIDS, is a retrovirus. Retroviruses burrow into your cells and get in your DNA and fuck around with it until it isn't yours any more. I'd sprayed a whole mix of them up my nose, and now I had something like flu.

The obvious thing to have done would be to have called Mark, confess, and ask him what this stuff was. After all, presumably he had been spraying it up his nose, too, just as Anne had been. She had said it was for her hayfever, but who got hayfever in November? And then there was that remark I'd overheard at the party, and the remark Mark had made about Anne. She'd got in on the ground floor through her husband, the man who had got deeply into genetic research before he died and who was now cryogenically frozen, waiting until he could be revived and made better. With all this came the thought that the party had been some kind of test which I'd failed, and the collapse of the movie deal was the first sign of that failure. If they knew I had stolen this stuff, what else might they do? It was pure paranoia of course, but all writers have a streak of paranoia in them and I was feeling particularly vulnerable.

So instead of calling Mark, I called on one of my old Oxford pals, who was doing research in the University College of London. He'd helped me get some of the technical details right in my TV scripts, and now I pretended that I was doing research for a new novel. Then I made another phone call, to someone else I'd consulted when writing those scripts.

"I can tell you what one of them is," Colin said that lunchtime, when he had read the canister label. "WRN is a human gene associated with longevity. I suppose WRN3 is a variant. If someone put it in a retrovirus, then it must be for gene therapy, although therapy for what I couldn't say. Lysosomes have been troublesome as a delivery agent though. I suppose the genes get into the blood system through the mucosal membranes, but I'm not sure how they'd target the right cells. Usually, people use genetically engineered lymphocytes or embry-

onic stem cells now, and transplant them directly. Still, I'd be interested in looking at it. Where did you get it?"

Colin was turning the slim grey canister around and around. His long white fingers were stained blue with the dye he used in electrophoresis gels. One hinge of his black-framed spectacles had been mended with yellow biohazard tape, and he was wearing the same shabby green cagoule he had worn at Oxford. He was a perfect example of what the upper class students had disdainfully called a northern chemist, but he was also a nice, straightforward guy, amused but not impressed by my success and sudden wealth.

I took the canister from him. We'd met in an Irish-themed pub called O'Neill's, on Euston Road. It was half-full: a bunch of braying teenage clerks in cheap suits and Noel Gallagher haircuts, clumps of students, some bewildered tourists in eye-hurting leisurewear, and the usual half dozen broken-veined, dry-haired, 50-year-old alcoholics who are fixtures in just about every pub in London. I thought that any one of them could be a private investigator on my tail. By now I was more than a little bit paranoid; I had had quite a morning, in Dalston.

When I stuck the canister in the breast pocket of my jacket, my thumb nail caught on a seam and hinged up with a excruciatingly sharp pain. Colin asked me if I was all right as I gingerly stuck the nail back down. Blood was leaking from the edges. It hurt like fuck.

I said, "Old DIY wound. I got the canister from a friend. But I can't tell you —"

"I might be able to run a sequence on it. Might be interesting..."

I got him on another subject, and when he had finished his half pint of Caffrey's and pie and chips, he looked at his watch and said he had to get back to the lab. As we were leaving, I asked as casually as I could about *telomeres*.

Afterwards, when I had used all the plasters from my BMW's first aid kit on my tender, loose fingernails, I sat and thought about the implications. The idea of introducing strange genes into my system was somehow worse than the idea of retroviruses. I had seen plenty of vampire flicks, and there was that strangely unpleasant movie, *Society*, in which a group of rich Californians turn out to be a species of slimy shape-changers.

My face was sore and tender. My joints ached.

Whatever I'd inhaled was changing me.

I gripped what I'd got in Dalston. Its heavy weight made me feel better, gave me the resolve to call Mark on my cell phone. I told him what I'd done. He was relieved. He said, "I left a message for you. We were both pretty pissed, eh? Drop it off at work."

I told him I'd meet him at his loft, rang off, and drove straight to Soho. I had all kinds of questions to ask him, but I didn't get many answers.

When he opened the door, I held up the canister and said, "I know."

"You know?"

"I worked it all out," I said, and told him.

Mark laughed, and that's when, frankly, things got a bit ugly. I showed him what I had, made him sit in one of his antique 60s chairs, and tied him up. At first he tried to bluff, and then he got angry and I got angry too, and things got out of hand. We had a shouting match

that hurt my already sore throat. I have to admit I hit him a couple of times with a pool cue. I didn't learn much. He said that he didn't know anything about telomeres. All he knew was that he paid a king's ransom for the kind of stuff I'd stolen, and it made him healthier than he'd ever been. It treated male pattern baldness, removed body odours, tightened up collagen to stop wrinkling. It was plastic surgery without scalpels or stitches; it was a health regime that actually worked, although it wouldn't work on me, apparently. Mark said that some kind of primer treatment was needed first.

But it was working, all right. I felt sicker than ever.

By this time Mark was in a lot of pain. He became stubborn and wouldn't tell me any more. So I killed him and dismembered his body, stuck it in the boot of my BMW and drove home.

All the lights were on in the house, and the front door was open. I thought that Jane had returned early, and bounded in, calling her name, forgetting for a moment about the cut-up body in the boot. But the woman waiting for me in the living room was Anne.

"This is all my fault," she said, coolly ignoring my dishevelled sweatiness. "I shouldn't have brought you on so quickly." She gave a little shrug. "But you are so very promising, Oliver, that I couldn't help myself. So let's help each other."

"I gave Mark his spray back," I said.

"That's good. That's a start. Sit down, Oliver. Take some deep breaths. You looked flushed."

She sat on the sofa and patted the space beside her, but I remained standing, my hand in my pocket. She didn't know it, but I was in control.

I said, "I know about the gene therapy."

She shrugged. "You've been under a lot of strain in a past few days, Oliver. You're worried about the movie deal. And I can see that you have a fever."

"You fucked up the movie deal as some kind of punishment because I didn't pass your test. What next? A couple of burly chaps coming to take me away?"

"Don't be silly, Oliver. There's no conspiracy. There was no test. Your deal fucked up because most of them do. There will always be more deals with someone of your obvious talent. Just finish the script and move on."

Which was perfectly reasonable in one sense, but crap in another, given that I had already killed someone involved in the conspiracy, even if he hadn't told me much about it.

Anne said, "I can fix up what's wrong with you. I can put you forward for the primer treatment, too, once you have enough money. This kind of thing will be available to everyone soon, but we'll have the edge because we have all the best scientists working for us. People like us will always have the edge. I'm on your side, Oliver, really I am. If you're a good boy, there's just a chance I might get you work on the script for the next Tom Rose movie."

That's when I shot her.

It's amazing how cheap a gun can be, in certain parts of London. I met this guy, Fat Tony, when I was doing research for the TV series. I was introduced to him by a journalist friend. Fat Tony was a punisher. You paid him to hurt people. So much for a broken nose, so much for a broken leg. I could have hired the gun from him

by the hour, but I bought it outright. I'm going to need it full time. Guns suit me. They deliver instant justice. It's a good thing they're illegal. If they were readily available, long before I became a success I would have been put away for mass murder of surly supermarket checkout clerks, people who insist on sharing their halitosis and armpit odours on the Tube, upper class idiots who bray in restaurants, half a dozen magazine editors, and almost every driver in the Central London Area.

Shooting Anne might seem harsh, but I had seen her at work. I knew when she was lying. And I knew about telomeres.

Thanks to my neighbours' sound system, no one heard the shots. I didn't bother to joint Anne; she was small enough to fold into a couple of binliners.

After I had stowed Anne in the boot, I tried to call Jane, but the hotel switchboard couldn't get an answer from her room. I love you, Jane. Don't look for me. I'm on a mission. I'm doing this for our unborn children.

Let me tell you about telomeres. They sit at the ends of our chromosomes and count how many times our cells divide by getting shorter. After a certain number of divisions, there are no more telomeres, and the cell can't divide any more. If you restore a cell's telomeres, it gains the potential to divide forever – it becomes immortal. That's what happens in cancer cells – their telomeres don't shorten after each division.

In *The Time Machine*, Wells's Victorian Time Traveller ended up in 8271 A.D., where the human race is split into two: the beautiful but weak, child-like Eloi who live in the gardens of the surface; the strong, ugly, sinister Morlocks who live amongst the subterranean machines. The Eloi were once the rulers, but became prey to their former servants, the Morlocks. Now think of a future where we – with our rashes and pimples, our bad breath and caries, our myopia and the rapid enfeeblement of old age – will be the servants of Eloi who will be strong and clever, bred for success and virtually immortal. Who will be made strong by things which will kill us.

Think of the rich and successful, with their perfect skin and perfect teeth. Think of the movie stars who seem to get younger every year. Think of the politicians...

They'll rule forever if they get the chance.

I'm in a Traveller's Lodge outside London, with my laptop and modem. I have £20,000 in cash. I've dumped the BMW. I've spent all night working on this; now it's time to move on.

The fever's worse. My joints are swollen, and blood is leaking out of my fingernails. My teeth are loose, and there are lumps under my skin...

Once I've downloaded this onto all the relevant newsgroups on the Internet, I'm off to do my bit for the ordinary guy. I wonder how many of them I'll get before I fall apart.

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Paul J. McAuley last appeared here with "All Tomorrow's Parties" (issue 119), and on that occasion we said: "A resident of St Andrews, Scotland, for a number of years, Paul recently gave up his job there and moved to a freelance life in London." Well, if the above new story is anything to go by, his experiences in the Great Wen may not have been entirely happy – but then he denies that the story is autobiographical in any way whatsoever...

## ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

Your columnist confesses to several recent lost weekends, thanks to the recurrence of an old addiction: writing (shudder) software. I got irritated once too often at the inadequacies of Grolier's CD-ROM *SF Encyclopedia*, and madly decided I could do better. Wait for a brutally hard sell in *IZ* small ads when I try to flog all Grolier victims my home-made Windows 95 *Encyclopedia* viewer, tentatively approved by John Clute...

## THE GARDEN OF TIME

**Stephen Baxter**, man of modesty, offers his own angle on the fracas at HarperCollins UK (where books are cancelled from on high against their editors' wishes, if not nice enough about China to suit the Murdoch strategy for world domination): "I only hope Rupert 'Keith' Murdoch doesn't notice that in *Titan* the Chinese drop an asteroid on the USA," Steve shyly conveys in 40-foot neon lettering. Meanwhile, sf fans admired the timing with which Malcolm Edwards, born survivor, deftly sprinted from HC to Orion before the uproar began.

**Jo Clayton** (1939-1998), author of nearly 40 sf and fantasy novels, died in February following a resurgence of her multiple myeloma.

**John Clute** has been showing off his transformed back garden. The BBC2 *Home Front* programme converted this at vast expense from a mere bit of roof to, er, a bit of roof with random plants in tubs, ever so many glass fishing floats, and *attitude*. Its bijou wonders and small-scale marvels were to appear on UK screens in March.

**Kenneth Gatland** (1924-1997), rocketry author, editor and technical adviser to BBC Radio's much-loved 1953-5 serial *Journey into Space*, died in December.

**Frederik Pohl** struck fear into fellow-writers' hearts by quoting a recent fan letter: "Dear Mr Pohl, I

am 18 years old and I haven't ever completed a book before reading *The World at the End of Time*. I would always get part of the way through the first chapter and then get too bored to finish...."

**Bryan Talbot**'s latest graphic epic approaches completion: "The title is still under wraps, but the subtitle is *The Legacy of Luther Arkwright* and it's nearly 300 pages long." I was rather taken with the draft artwork for a period tavern scene which, being rowdy and involving the ignition of farts, naturally features sf walk-ons – including Brian Aldiss, Iain M. Banks, Molly Brown, Octavia Butler, Ramsey Campbell, Susanna Clarke, Colin Greenland, Diana Wynne Jones, Gwyneth Jones, me ("You are the only one to have kept your glasses ..."), SMS and Bob Shaw.

**James White** is the newest winner of the New England SF Association's *Skylark Award*, celebrating Doc Smith's *Skylark* series by consisting of a large lens (shome mishtake surely?).

## INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

**Tiptree Award** for 1997's "gender-bending" sf: joint winners were *Black Wine* by Candas Jane Dorsey and the short "Travels with the Snow Queen" by Kelly Link, the third short story to be a Tiptree winner.

**Thog's Art Masterclass.** I quite liked Tor's new fantasy blockbuster, *The Runelords: The Sum of All Men* by David Farland ("Edited by David G. Hartwell"), but giggled immoderately at the cover painting. It wasn't so much the lady in the mediaeval mini-skirt as the central figure, a ghostly Viking type with vast and unutterably silly horns growing out of his helmet. Close textual study revealed the author's description which had been so sensitively interpreted: "His helm was a simple round thing of ancient design."

**Nebula Awards** 1997 novel shortlist ... *A Game of Thrones*, George R. R. Martin; *Ancient Shores*, Jack McDevitt; *Bellwether*, Connie Willis; *City on Fire*, Walter Jon Williams; *King's Dragon*, Kate Elliott; *Memory*, Lois McMaster Bujold; *The Moon and the Sun*, Vonda McIntyre.

**Golden Oldies.** *Amazing Stories* (est. 1926 by Hugo Gernsback) is being relaunched this summer, as a quarterly from card-games outfit Wizards of the Coast. A press release about what they inspiringly call "science fiction properties" implied that all stories would be game, film, and TV tie-ins. Some writers remained sceptical despite later assurances that original fiction will predominate. Meanwhile, *Weird Tales* (est. 1923) has a new publisher, DNA of *Absolute Magnitude* fame. George Scithers & Darrell Schweitzer continue as editors. Submissions: 123

Crooked Lane, King of Prussia, PA 19406-2570, USA.

**Who Will Rid Me ...?** Blurb from the US Diamond Comics catalogue, on a comic called *Solar: ACCLAIMED SCI-FI AUTHOR CHRISTOPHER PRIEST PENS SOLAR*. Christopher Priest, author of numerous science-fiction novels, has been known to write comic books from time to time – and his latest (and perhaps greatest) effort is to tackle an almighty Solar for Acclaim comics." When comics writer Jim Owsley decided for no very clear reason to change his name to Christopher Priest (see *IZ* 86), he surely had no intention of trading on an established author's reputation. But somehow that's the way it seems to be working out.

**21 Years Ago.** Another stupefying sf prediction, from a fan pundit in *Checkpoint* newsletter (1977) who'd just studied issue 2 of *Asimov's*: "The magazine is unlikely to last more than four issues." Someone, I dimly recall, said exactly this of *Interzone*.

**Small Press.** Steve Sneyd is at it again, with *Laying Siege to Tomorrow: Poetry in UK SF Fanzines, 1930s to 1950s*, including annotated extracts by Bulmer, Brunner, Clarke, Tubb, Youd/Christopher, etc. £2.70 post free from 4 Nowell Pl., Almondbury, Huddersfield, HD5 8PB.

**Fannish Fortunes.** San Francisco's 2002 Worldcon bid promotion involves fortune cookies: the contents ranged from the Hofstadterian "This fortune no verb" through the disquieting "The next set of *Magic* cards will be based on your college years" to the deeply soul-chilling "You will be Martin H. Greenberg's next co-editor" ...

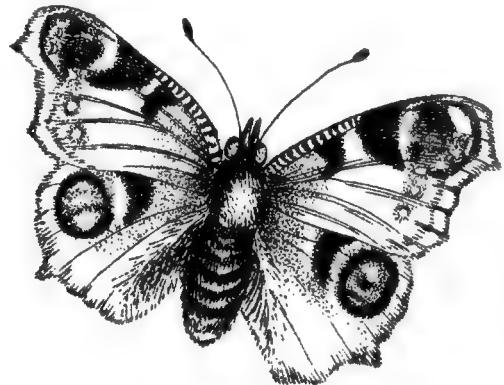
**Thog's Masterclass.** *Dept of Authors Who Should Perhaps Find A New Butcher*: "They'd see the way that some of their husbands twitched into life like dead meat when introduced into her company." (Stephen Gallagher, *Red, Red Robin*, 1995) ...

"Somewhere in Snowfield, were there living human beings who had been reduced to the awful equivalent of foil-wrapped Pop Tarts, waiting only to provide nourishment for some brutal, unimaginably evil, darkly intelligent, other-dimensional horror?" (Dean R. Koontz, *Phantoms*, 1983) ...

*Dept of How To Tell Evil Spirits To Go Away*: "Cyrus steadied the witch as she recovered enough to make a series of signs in the air with two sharply pointed fingers." (Gary L. Holleman, *Howl-O-Ween*, 1996) ... *Dept of SF Plot Plausibility*: "The Space Shuttle *Atlantis* – carrying a Russian satellite equipped with nuclear warheads – makes an emergency landing right in the middle of a Palestinian terrorist compound." (blurb, Timothy Rizzi, *Strike of the Cobra*)

# Red-Eye

*Madeleine Cary*



The thing to do with these grotesque insects, thought Faye, is to observe them. Curiosity left no room for terror. She lay like a dressed corpse in the safety of the mosquito net, arms crossed over her chest so they would not brush against the white gauze and feel the tiny pincers and antennae. The mad mosquito buzz stopped dead as the miniature predators hit the net. A black almond-shaped insect, a giant compared with the others, performed an irritating dance only inches from her right temple. She watched his black lacquered shell glinting in the moonlight. He fluttered his wings and left the net, only to land, rather too quickly, on the other side. Her heart thumped. This one was inside the net.

She was up in lightning time, shaking the net in a frenzy, beating it against the walls. The giant flying beetle cracked onto the stone floor and spun in a panic. One last mournful buzz and it was dead.

The bare room had no chair or cupboard so Faye's jeans were flung over her rucksack. She reached in their pocket for a cigarette. The packet was wedged in with the polaroid snap of Jorn, creasing his smiling face. She smoothed out the photograph; it was precious now, a handy companion on her lone travels.

She had met him several weeks earlier in a dusty street cafe in Jakarta. He had repelled her at first with his leonine looks, all pink skin and orange hair. Then she had noticed his bright eyes, blue as forget-me-nots, which took the menace out of his ruddy face. He was bantering effortlessly in Indonesian with a group of locals who were intrigued by his polaroid camera. He had taken a few snaps of them and as ghosts of their grinning faces sharpened into focus on the damp white card, they hooted in delight.

"Do you want to join in our fun and games?" he had asked Faye, a mere hint of a Dutch accent popping through the perfect English.

"I'm not in the mood, thanks," Faye said. "Besides, I don't know the language."

"You should learn it. If you can speak Indonesian you'll avoid a lot of hassle."

A young waitress placed a glass of syrupy coffee in

front of him and he whispered a few words to her in Indonesian. As the girl covered her giggling mouth with a delicate hand, the Dutchman turned to Faye with a smirk.

"That's the other thing," he said. "It's so easy to charm them when you know their language."

"But it doesn't matter what language I speak." Faye's voice cracked in exasperation, embarrassing her. "I'm an unmarried woman, travelling alone. A pariah. They either fear me or pity me in this part of the world."

"Then lie," he said, offering her the camera. "Here. Take a snap of me. Tell them I'm your husband. The Indonesians love photographs, especially of relatives."

She had given it only a moment's thought. What was wrong with a ruse if it made her lone travel easier? When she looked through the viewfinder at the big Dutchman, the lighting and composition were perfect. She clicked. The polaroid snap slithered out of the camera and the image of her bogus husband sharpened in pink and orange hues. There was only one problem. Jorn's blue eyes, caught staring straight into the lens, had turned a livid red.

They had exchanged a few pleasantries before he snapped a terse farewell then marched off down the street with the neat pack on his back framed by an impossibly white t-shirt. Faye watched his bright orange hair flapping like wings several inches above the crowd of blue-black heads.

Their meeting had inspired her. Ready to plunge into adventurous travel, she opened her map out on the table. Closing her eyes, she twirled her index finger in the air for a second before stabbing the map at random. Her eyes blinked open. The next destination on her travels had been chosen: her finger had fallen on the Moluccas, Indonesia's fabled spice islands.

This haphazard manner of plotting a journey seemed suspect now as she paced the cell-like guesthouse room in a tiny port on one of the northern spice islands. She ran a hand over her new cropped haircut; it was boyish but still blonde enough to attract attention. That Amazonian spirit she had left Jakarta with seemed to

have jumped ship somewhere along the way. She put the polaroid snap back in her jeans pocket then dug the guidebook out from her rucksack and leafed through it. These islands had a long tradition of magic. Theirs was a troubled history, too, with centuries of plunder by imperial mariners lustng after exotic spices. Puffing wildly on her cigarette, she blew smoke at the insects that were drawn to her hot face. The grey wisps reminded her of her first glimpse of the island earlier in the day from the deck of the passenger boat; on the horizon a perfect volcanic cone had surfaced, oozing dark smoke into the clean blue sky. This was virgin territory for backpackers. Real travel. She was 2,000 kilometres east of Java, with only a cigarette for company.

Once she had rigged the net back onto the dangling ceiling fan, she slipped into the shrouded bed desperate for sleep. Her blood pumped in a soporific rhythm, lulling her into unconsciousness. A high-pitched wail rattled through the streets and burst into her room, slapping her awake. She should have been used to it by now: the dawn call from the local mosque. But, as usual, she felt assaulted by it, violated, like she did every time she walked down the streets here, stared at and accosted. The concierge and the young girl would be awake soon, pottering about their morning duties in the guesthouse. She tensed up at the thought of them. Perhaps she had been too hasty in choosing this as her resting place. But then she remembered how she had been plodding wearily around the streets when the weather broke; how, as the sky thickened and the first drops of rain from the evening deluge sent the plants into a quiver, she had taken refuge in the first place she saw.

The Pengaran Guesthouse had looked welcoming enough from the outside. But as Faye had approached the front door she had heard female voices bickering inside the building. A woman, high on emotion, was ranting, drowning out a simpering voice that tried to punctuate the scolding. When Faye knocked on the door, it was opened so swiftly she was left with her hand knuckled in mid-air. The concierge, a wide hipped woman with almond eyes and smooth, round cheeks, had looked her over. Then she smiled, her gold teeth flashing a welcome.

As Faye kicked off her flip-flops and stepped inside, the front door closed with a thud, reducing the lashing rainfall to a distant hiss. At the back of the room a young teenaged girl was swaying in a sulk, her misshapen Madonna t-shirt making an awkward match with the flowered sarong tied at her waist. The concierge barked an order and the girl spun around and escaped through a beaded curtain. Faye heard her slender feet tapping on the stone floors all the way into the depths of the building.

The concierge opened up the tiny guest room and Faye flung her rucksack onto the bed in acceptance. Idling in the doorway expectantly, the concierge loosened her sarong over generous breasts then refastened it tightly. Faye knew what was coming. "Husband?" The Indonesian woman mouthed the word with difficulty. Faye nodded and handed her the picture of Jorn. After staring at it for some time with her fine brows drawn into a frown, the concierge had started to chuckle. It was not the first time Jorn's loud colouring and red eyes

had amused a curious local.

The chanting prayer from the mosque stopped abruptly. Faye curled into a foetal position on the lumpy bed. Somewhere in the neighbouring streets the first cockerel to shrug off its sleep screamed out. It would be five, perhaps six o'clock by now. Someone's morning ablutions in the guesthouse bathroom echoed around the courtyard. The chorus of coughing and spitting gradually diminished and Faye slipped, finally, into an exhausted sleep.

When she awoke she shrugged off her torpor, bathed and settled in for a morning tea on the Pengaran's forecourt. Energized by the promise of a new place to explore, she forgot her nocturnal anxieties and lack of sleep and looked forward to the day with a traveller's appetite. She sighed peacefully and poured a glass of tea. A large creature flapped around her head, making her jump and spill the tea. She was ready to bolt in case it was another flying beetle. But then it settled delicately on the rattan coffee table. It was a giant butterfly, a magnificent specimen. For a few seconds it fluttered its wings, then froze as if to advertise its beauty. The wings were as wide as Faye's hand; they looked like they had been fashioned out of orange velvet, laced with an intricate black-and-white motif.

A low cackle interrupted Faye's concentration. It was the concierge, amused by her fascination with the butterfly. The woman was chewing on a betelnut, and red spittle oozed around her gold teeth. When she flung back her head and yelled an order into the building, drops of saliva splashed from her mouth and hit the white walls like a spray of blood. Moments later, the girl appeared. She darted towards the butterfly, cupped it in her hands and moved swiftly into the lounge. Faye followed her as she hurried towards the noticeboard above the check-in desk. She acted with such deftness, Faye could not make out what she was doing. Then the girl stood back and proudly displayed her work. Faye swayed on a wave of revulsion.

The butterfly was pinned on the board with a thumb tack through each wing. It was pulsing in a frenzy. Faye was about to remove the tacks when the insect's energy tore it from the board, leaving two shreds of wing behind. The deformed creature, cruelly unbalanced, humped across the floor.

Faye drew her hand across her throat hoping the others would understand and put the thing out of its misery. The girl only giggled and sashayed back through the curtain. The concierge smiled sympathetically then pointed to the beckoning daylight outside. "Jalan," she said, flicking her fingers at Faye. Walk. Faye understood. The concierge wanted her out of the way.

She felt a fresh sense of adventure when she entered the sun-blasted street life. The jamboree in the small town alarmed her sluggish senses with its two-stroke engines, loudspeakered pop ballads and incessant chatter from crowds who were selling, buying or idling. Then she remembered. This was a spice island. Was it possible to catch the fragrant scent of nutmeg, clove and mace here? Out on the streets, petrol fumes and horse dung blended with smoking oil and rotten fruit. The smell was decidedly exotic. But hardly fragrant.

She stopped by a durian fruit stall. The yellow rubber-ball fruit reeked of decay, of faecal matter. Yet the locals considered the pulp a delicacy. The stallholder, an old woman with knotted hands, held up a prize durian, nodding and smiling. Faye hesitated. So far, she had shunned any opportunity to try the infamous fruit. A shout diverted her. "Missie!"

Faye turned to see a smartly dressed young local woman strutting eagerly towards her. She was holding a wide white umbrella up against the sun's rays.

"Miss, where are you from? What is your name?" It was a hackneyed inquisition by now, but less menacing from a woman.

"My name is Faye. I'm from England."

"Are you married?"

"Oh yes." Faye produced the polaroid snap. The young woman smiled at the picture of the red-eyed man. Handing it back, she continued her interrogation.

"Children?"

Faye halted but the Lying was already compulsive. "Yes. Two."

She felt the young Indonesian scrutinising her worn and unflattering traveller's clothes. Tapping one foot neatly shod in a patent court shoe, the young woman let her eyes linger on Faye's dusty sandals.

"My name is Rusti," she announced, bringing her black eyes up to meet Faye's. "I am not married. I have a career. I am 27 years old and a schoolteacher of English." Her litany of introduction over, she tossed a coin to the stallholder and grasped the huge durian fruit with tiny but determined hands. Then she reached for the stallholder's machete and sliced a neat cut through the fruit. The stringy pulp inside broke easily into edible pieces and Faye took a reluctant bite. It was salty but sweet, strangely palatable. The grimace on her face melted into a smile of approval. Rusti grinned for the first time.

"You are too suspicious," she said. "Too frightened." Her smile took the edge off the criticism.

She offered Faye her arm and the shade of her umbrella and the two women set off in a stroll down the main street, dodging the puddled potholes and piles of dung. Rusti explained how she tried to keep out of the sun as she was sensitive to light. Faye studied the young woman's pale gold skin and exquisite blue-black hair which was lacquered into a perfect chignon.

"You will come with me!" Rusti said suddenly, squeezing Faye's arm with both hands. "You must see the island! I will give you the best tour."

Faye despised guided tours yet found herself arranging a rendezvous with the young woman for later in the day. She had already decided that Rusti, delicate and diminutive though she appeared, was not a woman to cross. She began to give instructions on how to find the Pengaran Guesthouse when Rusti burst into laughter. Of course she knew where it was. There was nothing she did not know about the port and its inhabitants.

At the Pengaran, it was too hot for a midday siesta in her room so Faye languished instead in the cool, dark lounge. The butterfly's shredded wings were still pinned on the board and the debris of the dead creature was

lying on the floor. Faye crouched over it. Its head seemed to be moving, a seething mass of black. Only then did she notice the line of ants mar shalling towards it. They were eating the butterfly's eyes. Faye ran to her room for a tissue. She returned to pick up the tiny corpse, flicking off the ants with her index finger, and after wrapping it gently in the tissue, she dropped it in the waste bin.

It was a relief to escape the dark solace of the guest house and the mayhem of the streets. Rusti had arranged a mini-van for their island tour. The van honked its way through the port until it sped off onto a clear, smooth coast road that circled the base of the volcano. The driver, a sullen young man with mirrored sunglasses, drove as if he was being pursued and while Rusti maintained a tour guide patter, pointing out the sights, he never once dropped his speed. A black sand beach was already hidden behind a rock by the time Faye turned to peer through the back window; a Portuguese fort was a distant, dark blur behind a row of palms.

Finally, they left the main road and turned inland on an upward track. Undeterred by potholes and stones, the driver bolted over the uneven ground. As the two women were flung against the hot tin walls in the back of the van, Rusti's chignon slowly loosened, uncoiling like a black snake from the back of her head. She shook

her hair loose and the jet tresses fell around her shoulders like a mantilla. A silver hairpin had fallen onto her lap. She slipped it into her handbag. She was still in

her smart clothes, but with her loosened hair the polished veneer had gone. Her face was different too, relieved of its stern tension.

When the van finally screeched to a halt, Rusti smiled and reached out to take Faye's hand. "Come on, Missie," she said. "Now you can enjoy the spices."

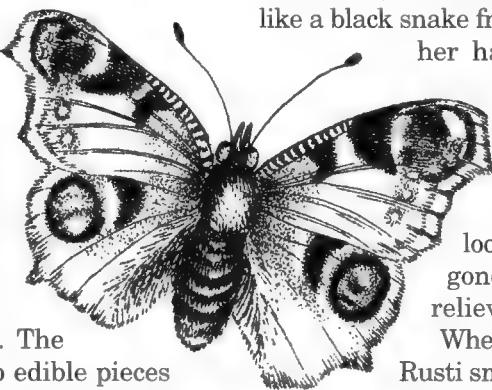
They stepped out into a clearing above the plantation. Faye swooned as the penetrating fragrance hit her. Even the tiniest intake of air carried the cloying aroma of nutmeg and clove. She took in a deep breath, closing her eyes to concentrate on the power of the scent.

When she opened them again, Rusti was already strolling down a path that led into a patch of jungle. The van driver had slumped in his seat, nodding his head to a heavy metal cassette. Faye followed Rusti down the path. It was some time before the warbling rock star and screaming guitars from the van were lost behind the vegetation. Soon there was just a sweet stillness punctuated by bird calls and a hypnotic insect hum. Rusti stepped daintily through the undergrowth that crawled onto the path, her mane of hair swaying around the waistband of her tailored slacks. She looked over her shoulder at Faye with a serene smile. The smugness in her manner had completely evaporated.

"Rusti, what can you tell me about the tradition of magic on the island?" Faye's voice grated in the tranquillity. She immediately regretted the question. It had sounded like a tourist's enquiry, breaking their intimacy.

Rusti stayed silent for a moment then slowed her pace.

"The volcano has been here for a long, long time," she said. She halted then tilted her head. Faye followed her



gaze up to the smouldering cone which peeked above the jungle.

"It gives us all we need to keep peace on the island." Rusti turned to look Faye in the eye. "Everything that grows here has power. Only a few islanders know how to use it."

She dragged her long mane of hair over one shoulder then fanned it across the lower half of her face as though drawing a curtain over the subject.

"So there is witchcraft here?" Faye asked.

"We can make medicines, if that's what you mean. We can heal and sometimes we can punish." Rusti giggled, tossed her hair over her shoulder and set off again down the muddy path. "Miss Faye, you are too curious," she called out. High above, a hornbill screeched, echoing her laughter.

When they reached the groves, Rusti explained how the nutmeg tree was sensitive to light. Rows of the little trees grew under the protection of the large kenari shade trees. Rusti plucked a fruit from a nutmeg tree and split it to show the kernel nestling in the soft golden flesh. The brown nut inside the kernel would eventually be ground up into nutmeg. The outer layer of the kernel produced mace, she explained. She scraped at the womb-red fibre with a sharp nail.

"Many foreigners came here for this tree," she said. "The Dutch invaders were the worst, destroying plants on other islands so that they could keep the only supply here."

In the clove plantation, Faye almost gagged at the overwhelming musky scent. Thousands of harvested cloves sat in stacks, drying in the sun. Rusti picked one up for her demonstration.

"Clove is from *clou*, French for *nail*," she said, slipping back into her tour guide tone.

"See how the clove is shaped like a nail. It is actually an unopened flower bud. If the bud opens into a flower, then the flavour and scent are lost. It must be picked before it opens."

She moved closer to Faye and lowered her voice. "It is the same with our women. They must be taken before the flower is opened."

She twirled the clove between two slim fingers. "In your country not many women are like this little clove when they marry?"

"Some are," Faye said with a weak grin, uneasy with the direction the conversation was taking.

"You were an unopened flower for your orange-haired man?"

Rusti was grinning now as though she already knew the punchline. Faye's shame about her lie, about the bogus husband and kids, hung around like a bad smell. Rusti was chewing on the clove, looking askance with brows raised, waiting.

"There is no husband, Rusti. And no children." Faye took the picture of Jorn out of her jeans pocket. "This is just another traveller on the road, I'm afraid. A Dutchman. I only knew him for five minutes." It was hard to admit to fraud, especially to a woman like Rusti, who seemed to have broken away from her own traditions. "Most people here are not like you," she continued. "They're puzzled or upset when they hear I am single. I took the easy way out."

Rusti flung back her head and let out such a scream

of mirth that several birds flapped from a nearby bush. She spat out the clove and slapped Faye's arm with her little golden hand. Faye looked again at the photograph and a laugh burst out of her like a sneeze. She knew exactly what to do. She held the photograph between both hands, ready to tear. Rusti's laugh petered out.

"Are you sure you want to destroy him?" she whispered.

"Yes, I'm sure," Faye said. "I never really liked him in the first place, so why should I rely on him now?" She tore the picture into pieces and was about to throw them to the wind when Rusti stopped her with a tut and a shake of the head.

"No litter please! Dispose of it properly."

Faye stuffed the scraps in her pocket.

When they arrived back at the guesthouse, the concierge was waiting. She had changed into a sarong that looked new, its fabric crisp and its colours vibrant. Her hair was different too, the greying black strands dragged back into a tight ball in the nape of her neck. She bowed humbly as Rusti approached her. Faye asked Rusti to explain to the concierge that she would be staying only one more night as the next boat back to Java was leaving in the morning. Rusti promised to come to the port to say her farewells and then turned her attention on the concierge. She took the older woman's arm and escorted her through the beaded curtain, chatting intimately in Indonesian.

Faye chilled for a moment at the thought that the concierge might hear about her pathetic lie. Then she shrugged; it was no longer important what anyone thought about her. She felt relief at having exposed the ridiculous ruse. As she made towards her room, she noticed movement in the shadows. It was the girl. She stepped out and faced Faye directly under the gas lamp, then pointed towards the noticeboard where the two shreds of butterfly wing stared out like sad orange clown eyes. "Mata," the girl said. "Mata." Faye remembered this word. Eye. The girl must be saying that the wings looked like eyes. "Mata," Faye repeated, nodding and smiling, thankful that the girl had finally tried to make conversation with her. But the girl only backed away, frowning, then slipped through the curtain and ran into the depths of the building. Faye passed the waste bin where the butterfly's remains still lay embalmed in the white tissue. She took the torn shreds of Jorn's photograph from her pocket and let them flutter down into the bin.

Before retiring, she prepared her room for the night circus of swarming insects, fixing up the net and lighting a smoke coil. She slipped into bed ready for a deep sleep. When she closed her eyes, technicolour images of the day danced in her head. It was a peaceful night. Not even an insect hum disturbed the stillness. And then, she heard it.

Someone was moaning deep within the building. It was a strange sound, not born out of passion or fear. Faye left her net and opened the door. Now she could smell something too, a spicy, rank odour. She slipped to the back of the lounge and passed as quietly as possible through the beaded curtain. The kitchen and bathroom to the right were dark and still. The moaning was

coming from the corridor down to the left. She prowled slowly towards it and each step of the way her nose detected familiar scents, first clove then nutmeg. A door was slightly ajar at the end of the corridor, letting the overpowering smell escape. As she got nearer to it, she heard that the sound was more of a chant, a repetitive mantra in a familiar voice. It was the concierge. Faye reached the door and peeped into the room.

The girl was sitting on a bed, wrapped in a blanket. She was shivering in what could have been a fever or a state of terror. A pot bubbled away over a range of candles, supported by an iron trivet. Chanting, the concierge hovered over the pot and stirred rhythmically. A sickening stench filled the room. Little conical piles of brown, red and orange powders were dotted around the floor like miniature volcanoes.

Suddenly the concierge stopped chanting and ladled some of the brew into a beaker. The girl was sobbing, trying to turn away, but the concierge gripped her face and forced her to take a sip. The girl grimaced, then drank reluctantly. Faye noticed the Michael Jackson poster on the wall and a shelf of knick-knacks, a small doll next to a large bottle of scent. A pair of jeans stood proudly on a hanger over the window.

Like adolescents everywhere, the girl had littered her bedside table with an untidy mess. A weary candle flickered in the middle of it, casting a pulse of light over the odds and ends. It took only seconds for Faye to focus on the details. The sight of the bizarre collection of familiar items made her catch her breath and step back into the corridor. She moved forward again slowly. She had not imagined it. There, lying on the crumpled tissue, were the remains of the tortured butterfly. Propped against the wall was the photograph of Jorn, taped together crudely so his face had a twisted symmetry. Then she noticed his eyes. It looked like someone had pierced them with a sharp instrument for now they were two holes. Finally, she recognized the thin, shiny object that was glinting in the candle glow. It was Rusti's hairpin.

She retreated and made for her room, locking the door on the stench. As she crept under the net, she could still feel the concentrated spices and herbs burning her sinuses. It was some time before she fell into a deep sleep.

Rusti was waiting for her at the port the next morning. She looked smart in a bright yellow shift, her hair tightly braided in a French plait. She asked Faye if she had slept well.

"Not really. There was some trouble in the guest-house last night. I think the young girl was very ill."

Rusti sighed. "The concierge has had a terrible time with the girl. It is her daughter, her only child. There was a man here – a foreign man. He stayed with them and took favours with the girl. By the time he left she was like an opened clove."

"How dreadful. I am sorry." Faye felt a westerner's guilt.

"Do not worry," Rusti said. "The concierge has sorted it out."

And then Faye thought back to the earlier hours of that morning when the girl had been crying and the concierge had shuttled up and down past the beaded curtain hauling piles of linen. From the bathroom, Faye

had seen the concierge in the courtyard dumping the soiled linen in the washing trough, her face scowling in a mixture of anger and sadness. She remembered clearly how the concierge had lowered the sheets into the water and pink clouds had swirled out like smoke rings. How those clouds turned red. How, finally, the linen was floating in a trough of diluted blood. When she had hurled her rucksack onto her back and left the key by the check-in desk, she had still heard the teenaged girl crying as if in pain from the back of the building.

"Yes. I'm sure she has sorted it out," Faye said.

As the boat pulled away from the dock, Rusti waved a prim goodbye then stood there looking like a golden fruit amidst the squalor on the dock, her wide white umbrella protecting her from the light. Faye gazed one final time at the smoking volcano that was keeping sentry over the island.

It was only four days later that she checked into a traveller's dormitory on Java's east coast. She had just settled on the front patio to enjoy a syrupy coffee when she heard a familiar voice bantering in Indonesian.

The t-shirt was not so white any more and the orange hair was just a little dishevelled. He looked cool in mirrored sunglasses.

"Jorn?" She went to sit next to him. "Remember me? Jakarta? Street cafe? You let me take a picture of you so I could have a bogus husband."

"Ah, yes," he said. "The nervous English woman."

"Not any more. I don't carry your picture with me now. I've had what you might call an enlightening experience since we met. Tell me, what do you know about the spice islands?"

"You were there?" He was fidgeting now, his face turned towards the table. His stubbled lower face stretched into an uneasy smile. "The Moluccas, eh? I remember them well. I must have been there several weeks before I met you."

He sat quietly for some moments. Faye was eager to see those forget-me-not blue eyes again but the Dutchman kept his garish shades on.

A young Javanese boy came to him with his backpack. "Time to go, Mister," he said. "Doctor busy man. Not wait."

Jorn reached behind his chair and produced a white stick. He rose slowly.

"I must go," he said, turning awkwardly towards Faye. "I'm in real trouble. I'm losing my sight."

And then he reached up and removed the sunglasses. His eyes were red. As red as the mace in the fleshy nutmeg fruit. As red as the blood in the girl's linen.

As he hobbled away, hunched over on the boy's arm, Faye could hear the tap tap of his stick for a long time before it was lost in the din of the bustling street life.

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**Madeleine Cary** has sold several short stories to general markets, including one piece that was read on BBC Radio 4 and another which is due to appear in a forthcoming *Time Out* anthology edited by Nicholas Royle. The above is her first in *Interzone*. She lives in Brighton, and has just completed her first novel – which currently is being agented.

# The Real MOLLY BROWN

*Interview by John Meaney*

Well-known to Interzone readers, Molly Brown is a prolific and prize-winning writer of science fiction and crime stories. Among her awards is the BSFA Award for Best Short Fiction, for "Bad Timing" (IZ 54). Of her three novels, the major work is *Invitation to a Funeral*, a riveting murder mystery set in Restoration London. The other novels are *Virus*, a young adult sf novel, and *To Say She Loves Me*, a "Cracker" TV-series novelization. A long-term English resident, this American-born writer has held a bewildering variety of jobs, from actress and stand-up comedienne to armed guard. For the interviewer's safety, the following inquisition was conducted by e-mail.

**John Meaney:** Right. Fasten the straps. Get that spotlight right in her face. Electrodes? Whips? That will do nicely. So, let us begin... I guess "Bad Timing" brought you to the attention of IZ readers. Does writing in a relatively light-hearted vein come easily for you?

**Molly Brown:** Don't I wish. Nothing comes easily for me; I've got this little imaginary guy who sits on my shoulder shaking his head in disgust at every word I write. (He's there right now, telling me how, despite the fact I'm only three sentences in, I've already made a complete mess of this interview.) Though if I think about it, the little guy is probably less intrusive when I'm writing something funny – or at least mildly amusing.

**JM:** Is your past life as a comedienne an influence here?

MB: I did stand-up comedy for five or six years, so I suppose it must have some influence on my fiction writing, but not as much as you might think. I have always had a weakness for sight gags and slapstick, so the type of comedy I did as a stand-up was more physical and visual than verbal. I used to turn up for a gig with a shopping trolley full of props.

I did an act with two other women for a couple of years. We called ourselves The Pointless Sisters and everything we did was improvised on the spot, with nothing written down. I was also part of the regular cast of a show called "When Suddenly..." which was billed as an "improvised comedy thriller." Everything we did was off the top of our heads, so every show was different.

After doing stuff like that, I could never settle down to anything too rigidly scripted, so the last couple of years I spent performing, my solo act got weirder and weirder, to the point where I was even getting booked into galleries as "performance art."

I didn't start writing fiction until 1988 (and didn't start selling it until a few years after that), but I had written comedy sketches for a couple of revues. I knew I could write something like, *so and so enters stage right, says this and that, then exits stage left*. But I had no idea how to write descriptions. What does he look like? What does the room he's in look like? What is he thinking? That was the hard part (or one of the hard parts). I still have trouble with description. I can see the scene in my head, but I don't always have the words to make you see it, too.

**JM:** Have any particular writers influenced you?

MB: There are many writers whose work I enjoy and admire. Philip K. Dick is a special favourite. So is Raymond Chandler. I remember being struck by the beautiful simplicity of

books like *The Pearl* by John Steinbeck, or *Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse. I read *Steppenwolf* by Herman Hesse when I was in my teens, and I loved it! These days, I remember very little of the plot, but there are images that still stick in my mind, like the flashing sign advertising an exhibition: "For Madmen Only." I wonder if I'd like that book as much if I read it today. I'd love to get hold of a copy and find out.

But my all-time hero has to be James Thurber. I first came across his writing when I was eight years old. He made me laugh out loud then and he still cracks me up now.

Admiring someone is not the same as being influenced by them, however. As much as I wish I could write like any one of the authors I've mentioned above, the fact is, I don't. On the other hand, whenever someone else has told me who *they* think my influences are, they always name writers I've never heard of.

**JM:** *I'm not falling into that trap – I think you write just like Molly Brown. So which of Molly Brown's short stories are you most satisfied with, in retrospect?*

**MB:** I'm never 100% happy with anything I've written; there's always something I wish I'd done differently, or just plain better. But I suppose if I had to pick a story I'm not too dissatisfied with, it would have to be "Women on the Brink of a Cataclysm," not because I think it's such a great story or it's so well written, but because the scientific idea I was trying to explore in it is one I find fascinating and exciting.

Which story would you pick if you were me?

**JM:** *That would depend on whether I were the good Molly Brown, who wrote "Bad Timing," or the evil Molly Brown who wrote, say, "Feeding Julie," which is quite nasty.*

**MB:** The evil Molly Brown – I like that. People are always going on at me about how "Feeding Julie" is such a grim and nasty story. Someone actually told me they thought I was sick, as if they expect someone who spends their days in front of a computer making up stories about nonexistent people to be normal. Then they ask why don't I just write "nice" stories like "Bad Timing."

**JM:** *Right. "Bad Timing" seems to be comedy: a future archivist falls in love with a long-dead romance writer, and steals a time machine which looks like a bicycle (but doesn't have time to read the instructions). But the implied happy ending isn't there, is it?*

**MB:** "Bad Timing" actually ends with the poor woman dying of old age, but nobody ever seems to notice that. I guess people assume it will all turn out okay in the end because the guy's



got a time machine, even though he hasn't got a clue what he's doing and he's missing most of the instruction manual. They also tend to forget that he's a fugitive on the run for theft and assault – remember he knocked his friend out cold when he was caught stealing the time machine.

And why did he steal the time machine in the first place? Because he took one look at a photograph of a woman he'd never met and decided he was in love with her. Is this anyone's idea of an emotionally mature adult? If "Bad Timing" was anything other than a time-travel romance, this guy would be a stalker!

In the end, I think "Bad Timing" is actually a tragedy. The woman dies old and alone, her body lying undiscovered for who knows how long, because she spent her life waiting for a man who never managed to show up at the right time.

That's all comedy is, really: tragedy with jokes. But that's the evil Molly Brown talking. Ask me about it another time, when the good one's in.

JM: In "Women on the Brink of a Cataclysm" the heroine, Joanna Krenski, is a tough, leather-jacketed, avant-garde sculptress – her sculptures are headless Barbie dolls, reworked auto parts, TVs endlessly showing a woman scrubbing the floor – who gets into her friend's experimental time machine, set for two minutes into the future. When Joanna climbs out, she confronts a woman who's dressed like someone from a 1950s sitcom, wearing pearls and high heels while painting very twee pictures. But the woman is Joanna.

MB: She's a version of Joanna: the Joanna she might have been if she'd been born into a world where the birth-control pill had never been invented. I never actually state it in the story, but that was the idea behind those worlds where nothing much had changed from the '50s. Without the pill, there would have been no swinging '60s, no sexual revolution, and very little opportunity for women. The one thing all the Joanna Callahans have in common, whether they live in one of the '50s-style universes or not, is that they are the Joannas that got married at 17 because they were pregnant.

That's why they're all so resentful and eager to escape, not because they're lives are so terrible, but because they were forced to abandon their dreams at any early age.

JM: It's a comment on the arbitrariness of personality, isn't it? The way our inner selves are dependent on chance.

MB: To a degree, yes. But not totally. Otherwise, everyone who grew up in a similar environment would have the same personality and that certainly isn't the case. I think that

what environment and/or circumstance can sometimes do is to bring out something in a person's character – either good or bad – that might otherwise have remained dormant.

JM: "Our" Joanna dislikes most of the other versions of herself, but finds one whose place she'd like to take. Different Joannas even start murdering each other.

MB: Joanna's problem is that she's got a few fundamental character flaws. She's selfish, conceited and completely self-absorbed, but she's never done anything especially evil... because she's never had to. But when she finds herself in a difficult situation, she's horrified to learn that deceit and violence come to her rather easily.

By the end of the story, she's managed to redeem herself quite a bit, yet she's still not above using Joanna Callahan's sons to help her sell work based on Joanna Hansen's ideas. Of

*"I watch scientists on television explaining quantum theory, and I think, how can they be so calm?"*

course she would argue that copying Joanna Hansen's work isn't really stealing since they're the same person, but she'd be lying.

I think that if you met a parallel version of yourself, it would be very difficult for you to like them because they would a living reminder of every single one of your faults. Your faults would be impossible to ignore because they'd be staring you in the face. I'm one of those people who cringes every time they hear a tape-recording of their own voice. If I met a parallel version of myself, I'd spend the whole time telling her to be quiet.

JM: In "Learning to Fly" there are hallucinating and drug-using characters from two worlds, each of whom might be dreaming the other. In "The Psychomantium" there are characters who may be ghosts or alive, depending on the world they're in. Can I safely say that the concept of parallel universes

holds some fascination for you?

MB: It's one of my favourite subjects. Don't ever get me started on it in person, because I tend to get over-excited and wave my arms around. Is it really possible that every action with more than one probable outcome causes a brand new universe to come into being? Do such minor decisions as what to wear on a particular day or what to have for breakfast really cause an entire universe to split in two? Let's say I get up in the morning and decide to have a cup of coffee rather than my usual pot of tea. Have I really gone and made the universe reproduce itself, like some kind of gigantic amoeba?

Now... shall I have regular coffee or a decaf? Uh-oh, I've done it again. Meanwhile, all the parallel universes I've created in the last few seconds are full of individuals, each making their own decisions, causing each new universe to split and split again. So how many universes did you create today? And your boss? And your next-door neighbour? And that man who sat next to you on the bus last week, the one that reeked of stale perspiration and spent the whole ride muttering to someone you couldn't see? Am I in every one of that man's universes? Are you? If there are zillions of copies of all of us, acting out every probability, then what happens to free will? What happens to God and the soul and heaven and hell?

Sometimes I watch scientists on television explaining quantum theory, and I think, how can they be so calm? If any part of this is true, it calls every belief system humankind has had since who knows when and everything you think of as reality – including your own identity – into question. In "Women on the Brink..." each Joanna assumes that she is the only "real" one; the others are merely variations on a theme.

Another story of mine ("Asleep at the Wheel," which was published in a magazine called *Phantoms*) is told from two alternating points of view: the ghost of a girl who was murdered at the age of 17 and has blocked out the memory of her violent death, and a middle-aged woman who has a series of disturbing dreams she can never remember on waking. The two of them are of course the same person. But which one of them is real? Is it the middle-aged woman, dreaming that she might have died young, or the dead girl, dreaming that she might have lived? (You asked me earlier about influences; I've just spotted one for you. The Chinese philosopher, Chuang Tzu, went to sleep and dreamed he was a butterfly. And when he woke up he wondered if he was really Chuang Tzu, who had dreamed he was a butterfly, or a butterfly now dreaming that he was Chuang Tzu.)

And here I am now, assuming I'm

the real me. But maybe the real me is somewhere else. Maybe she's living in a mansion, maybe she's living in a tenement with 15 kids, or maybe she's living in a cardboard box. For that matter, who says I have to be a woman? If there's a separate universe for every possibility, there must be at least as many where I'm a man. This "me" nearly died when I was nine years old, so there must be a large number of universes where I no longer exist. There must be many others where my parents never met, or were never born themselves. And what about the brothers, sisters, cousins, sons and daughters I never had? Do they really exist somewhere? Are they alive and as conscious as I am?

And where are all these universes, anyway? (I have this vision of God as some guy with an overcrowded loft, muttering that he's got nowhere left to put the things, they're stacked up to the rafters and now they're taking over the garage.) Are universes like Doctor Who's Tardis, small on the outside, but deceptively spacious inside? Or – and this might solve God's storage problem – are at least some universes mental rather than physical?

I could go on and on about the endless questions the many-worlds theory raises in my mind, but one advantage of doing this by e-mail is that I can tell when I'm getting carried away by looking at the number of paragraphs on the screen in front of me, and right now I see way too many. I'll shut up about parallel universes for now, except to say that it's a theme I'm sure I'll be returning to again and again. I just can't leave it alone.

**JM:** Before you make a decision, the probabilities of all outcomes are superimposed in a kind of twilight state, like a *Molly Brown* who is both good and evil.

**MB:** Or like Schrodinger's cat, simultaneously dead and alive until one reality gets locked into place by the act of observation. I could make an obvious crack here about how whether I'm the good or the evil *Molly Brown* depends on if I'm being observed, but I think the two of us must have bludgeoned that joke to death by now, don't you?

**JM:** And speaking of bludgeoning... In "Doing Things Differently," a ship landing on a new world is greeted by the cuddliest teddy-bear aliens imaginable – who bludgeon their own heads in bloody protest at the ship's presence. And that's only the start.

**MB:** You know what that story's based on? *Wild Swans* by Jung Chang, which is about her family's life in China. Suicide as a form of protest is a recurring theme throughout the book. When Jung Chang's grandmother, a former concubine, was going to marry an elderly widowed doctor, the doctor's children objected so strongly to the marriage

that at a family gathering, one of the doctor's sons took out a gun and shot himself in front of everybody, including his own wife and children.

To me, the interesting thing is that the woman he perceived as such a threat to his family was standing right there, but he didn't shoot her – he shot himself. And the "shame" of the act fell not upon the guy who had killed himself, but upon his father, because the father was seen as having caused his son's death by becoming involved with this unsuitable woman.

Later on, under Mao, suicide was considered a highly effective means of protest because everyone was supposed to be happy under the new regime and every time someone killed themselves it was a great source of embarrassment for the government. I've simplified it, but that's the basic idea.

What I tried to do in "Doing Things Differently" was to take that idea to its illogical conclusion, a society where all conflicts are resolved by emotional blackmail: I'm going to kill myself and it'll be all your fault and

then you'll be really sorry. But the thing is, it works. On this planet, they never hurt each other, they only hurt themselves, and the concept of shame is so strongly ingrained in them, conflicts rarely last beyond the first strike to your own head.

It's because the human doesn't understand this and responds in completely the wrong way that the situation escalates and the natives are forced to take more drastic action and start killing themselves. But, like that poor young man in *Wild Swans*, it never occurs to them to kill the person they see as the threat. To them, that would be shameful and wrong. But that changes when the human is forced to destroy the moral foundation of their society in order to save them from mass destruction.

And when "Doing Things Differently" was published, I had all these people telling me, thank goodness you wrote something funny again.

**JM:** They'd think your crime stories are a real hoot, then. You know, there's the teenage junkie prostitute in



Photo: Paul Brazier

"Angel's Day" who's "rescued" by a good-looking guy who isn't exactly Richard Gere. And the woman whose adopted daughter was killed by her abusive husband, in "A Sense of Focus." And the cheery girl-meets-boy, boy-goes-to-prison, boy's-best-friend-rapes-girl story of "What to Tell Santos."

MB: Okay, I admit it. "Doing Things Differently" was actually meant to be funny and "Bad Timing" does have a happy ending eventually. I was only pointing out the dark underbelly of these particular stories in a feeble attempt to be taken seriously. Though I like to think there is a serious point hidden within most of my so-called funny stories, the truth is I'm actually thrilled to bits whenever somebody tells me they've laughed at something I've written.

The crime stories you mention above are another matter entirely. They are completely joke-free and for the most part rather depressing, probably because they are more based on reality as we know it than my sf and/or fantasy stories, where the (sometimes very slight) differences from our own world are just enough to let me distance myself emotionally.

To take just one example: as you've already mentioned, "A Sense of Focus" is about the killing of a child. It's loosely based on a case that made the news a few years back, where a married couple were charged with the murder of their illegally adopted child and the woman's defence was that she had been as much a victim of her husband's abuse as the child. And when I saw the pictures of that woman, she was a mess: covered in bruises, teeth missing, broken ribs, big bald patches on her scalp where her hair had been pulled out. There have been some rather grim ideas I've still managed to have fun with, stick my tongue firmly in my cheek and happily take things to their illogical conclusion, but not this one. The subject of that story was too real and too painful; I could not bring myself to make fun of it. The same goes for the other stories you mentioned.

Also, I don't know if this is funny or ironic or even the least bit interesting, but, just like there are people who go on at me about how they only like my funny stuff and why don't I just stick to that, there are all these others who go on at me just as much about why don't I just stick to gritty realism.

JM: Crime and sf: your life must be twice as exciting as the average writer's. Two markets for your stories. Easy.

MB: Ha! What it means is that I spread myself so thin that I remain equally unknown in a wide variety of genres. I stop to write a crime novel and I vanish from the sf scene. I stop to write sf and I vanish from the

crime scene. And then to make matters worse, I occasionally dabble in the mainstream. Anyone will tell you that this is a recipe for economic suicide. If I had any sense at all, I'd pick one genre and stick to it. But common sense has never been one of my strong points. Besides, as a former unknown actress, I'm terrified of typecasting. I may be dooming myself to life in a cardboard box, but I will not be labelled.

I've just re-read that last sentence and I sound ever so strident! The truth is, I'm just an ageing child who hasn't yet decided what she wants to do when she grows up.

JM: Your major work to date is *Invitation to a Funeral*. Certainly, no one could read it and feel depressed afterwards. Aphra Behn – playwright and ex-spy – and her friend Nell Gwyn are a lot of fun. There are her somewhat drunken friends (including a former

*"I'm just an ageing child who hasn't decided what she wants to do when she grows up."*

*lover); chaotic rehearsals for the new play, with the most untalented actress imaginable; extra-marital intrigue and foreign espionage at the royal court. Yet at the same time, Aphra throws perfume over herself in the mornings, in lieu of washing; the once-handsome Duke of Buckingham has dark brown, rotting teeth; perfumed handkerchiefs are a real necessity for gentlefolk walking among the poor. There is seamless movement in the story, from high comedy to the unforgiving reality of 17th-century poverty. Was this in your mind from the time you started to plan the novel?*

MB: Not really. It was just that I was trying to be as honest as possible about the conditions of 17th-century life, as far as I understood them. It was a smelly, dirty and extremely unhygienic time. If you or I travelled back in time and tried to walk down a 17th-century alley, we'd probably keel over.

JM: And one of the bodies is discovered in – oops, nearly gave the plot away. At least one of the corpses turns up in circumstances which you could have made amusing, but didn't. Instead, you focus on gashed cadavers and blood all over the walls.

MB: Yeah, well... I wanted *Invitation to a Funeral* to be a funny and enjoyable book, but I didn't want to take the traditional "cosy" mystery approach to murder and reduce it to nothing more than a mildly diverting puzzle with a bloodless and conveniently odour-free victim.

I'm happy to say that I haven't had a lot of contact with dead bodies, so in trying to get it right, I had to rely on articles I've read, documentaries I've seen, and a rather morbid pastime I developed while researching the book, which was to sniff around dead animals. Well, one animal, actually.

I happened to notice a dead fox lying on the lawn in front of some flats a few doors down from where I live, and since I was trying to get a handle on what death does to the body, it seemed a perfect opportunity for some on-the-spot research. One of the things you always hear or read about is the smell of a dead body, so that was one of the main things I was trying to find out about first hand, and the only way I could do that was to get down and start sniffing. It was very educational for me, but worrying for the neighbours. You should have seen those net curtains twitch.

JM: Aphra Behn was even more scandalous, wasn't she?

MB: In those days, a woman writing for publication or public performance was considered "immodest" and therefore little better than a prostitute. I guess it was to do with the idea that writing for the general public was comparable to being publicly available yourself. Also, Aphra Behn dared to write about sex, which was considered perfectly acceptable for a man, but scandalous for a woman.

JM: Ex-spy, ex-convict, and the first Englishwoman to make a living as a writer! But I'd never heard of her before I read the novel, I'm afraid.

MB: I hadn't heard of her myself until about six years ago. I'd been asked to write a story for an anthology called, *Royal Crimes*, and I went to my local library to look for ideas. I came across a book in the history section called *Royal Mistresses*, figured it was a pretty sure bet I'd find something useful for a crime story in there, and started flicking through the pages. That was the first time I came across Nell Gwyn and Louise de Keroualle, rival mistresses of Charles II. I figured they'd be perfect characters for a story – not only did they hate each other, they were funny.

I knew nothing of English history.

I'd heard the term "Restoration" but I wasn't sure what it meant; I had a vague idea it was something to do with the theatre. So I had to start from scratch when it came to research. I picked up an armload of learned tomes on 17th-century history, took them home and found I couldn't understand a word. The books were all written by academics who assumed a certain amount of prior knowledge, when I lacked even the simplest basics. So I went back to the library, only this time I headed for the children's section, where the words are simple and there are lots of pictures. From there, I worked my way back up to adult level.

It was while I was doing the research for this short story that a friend of mine named Paul Dorrell (who has since passed away and is terribly missed by all who knew him) told me that if I was writing something set in that period, I must include Aphra Behn because she was an amazing woman who was centuries ahead of her time. So I threw her in at the last minute as a supporting character, solely because of a friend's suggestion. I spent six months researching the background for one funny 5,000-word story. Once it was finished, I swore I'd never write anything historical again. Then an editor at one of the publishing houses took me to lunch and insisted that I write a novel set in that period with those characters.

I knew enough to write a short story, but before I could feel confident enough to write a whole novel, I needed to do more research. I spent the next three years reading everything I could find about the 17th century. These days, I'm a fountain of useless knowledge; I can tell you everything from the price of an orange at the Theatre Royal to what the bellman at St Sepulchre's church would say as he tolled the bell the night before a hanging at Tyburn.

I don't get invited to a lot of parties.

**JM:** Did you read Mrs Behn's novels or plays, or other Restoration dramas? There seems to be a real authenticity to Aphra's choice of swear words, for instance.

**MB:** I think I've read all of Aphra Behn's plays and most of her novels. Most of them were in books I borrowed and had to give back, so I don't have them any more, and since it's been a few years since I read them, my memory of individual plots is a blur. But I do remember laughing

out loud. Historians and literary critics tend to treat Aphra Behn as a rather po-faced arty farty type, but I think she was hilarious. Her comedies are full of sight gags and slapstick and people hiding under beds and donning all kinds of crazy disguises.

The swear words and slang expressions in the book are taken from various 17th century sources such as letters, plays, and diaries, but for the most part, I modernised the dialogue.

**JM:** Your award-winning web site, [www.okima.com](http://www.okima.com), has a wealth of information about the book and the characters.

**MB:** How kind of you to mention the fact that my site has been showered with such prestigious honours as the coveted "Cheese Dog's Pick-o-the-Pack" award, and "Cool Site of the Hour," which means I get to display a little penguin icon.

**JM:** And there's a jaunt around 17th-century London: Bedlam, where visitors paid a penny to see the loonies; how to avoid being hung at Tyburn if you know how to read... But it's very detailed, if you want to explore that detail. Not just a collection of odd facts.

**MB:** It is just a collection of odd facts, really, though I've organized them by

geographical location, the idea being that it's an online tour: you go from place to place, and at each stop along the way, you read some facts and/or anecdotes related to that place. Such as the fact that Bedlam, which you mentioned, was actually a well known pick-up joint (you might enter alone, but you didn't have to leave that way) or that experiments conducted at Greasham College included the transfusion of blood from one dog to another in hope that along with the blood, the second dog would absorb the knowledge of how to perform the other one's tricks.

**JM:** Oh, and I liked the list of causes of death during plague times.

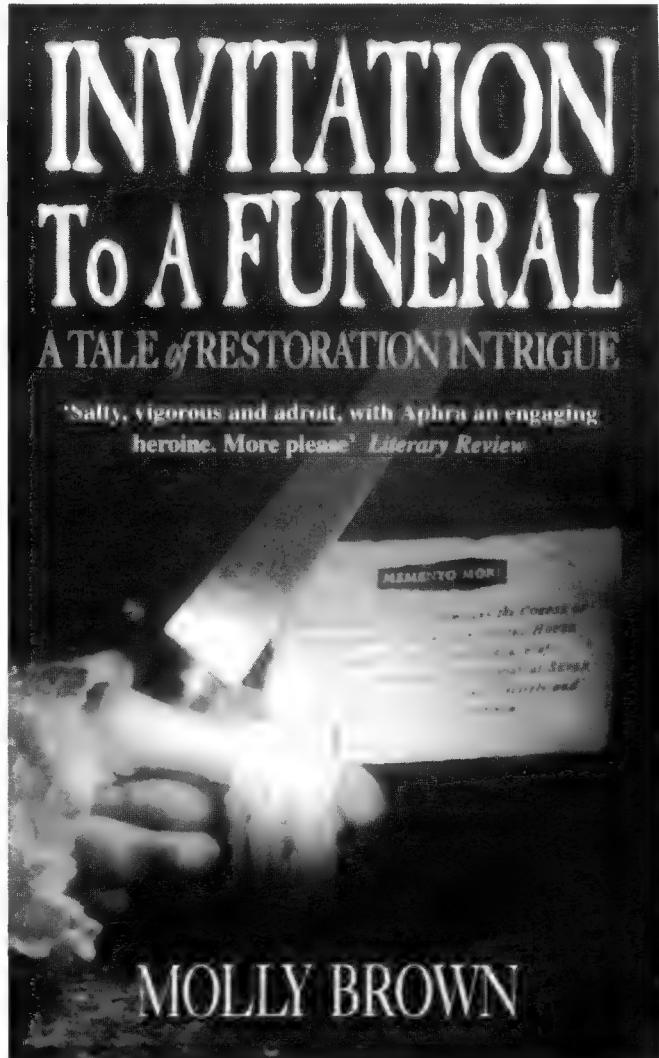
**MB:** You're talking about things like "chrisomes" and "rising of the lights." I have something like 90,000 words of typewritten notes on the 17th century, plus a thick wedge of photocopied pages from various reference books I wasn't allowed to take home from the library and a shelf full of history books that I went out and bought, and I still have no idea what "chrisomes" and "rising of the lights" mean.

**JM:** Has it been a positive experience, setting up your own website?

**MB:** For the most part, yes. I've had some lovely e-mails from total strangers who've visited the site and then gone out to buy the book, which is all that I can ask for, really. I've also discovered that a number of universities around the world and at least one high school in New Zealand are linking to my site as an "online resource." A few university courses are actually using my site as part of their curriculum. As a former shoe-shine girl who barely managed to get through high school, I find this hilarious. Talk about the blind leading the blind...

The down side is that I keep getting e-mails from webmasters of hardcore porn sites, wanting to exchange links with me. I spent ages wondering why they wanted to link to a tour of Restoration London, until I started using a program that lists referring URLs. (What this means is that I can see who's linking to my site. It also means that if someone's come to my site through one of the search engines, I can not only see which search engine they used, but what they were searching for.) The first time I used this program, I discovered how my innocent historical site had got its X-rated reputation.

In one day alone, someone searching for



"whippings" had been directed to my page about Bridewell, someone searching for "Spanish" and "bitch" ended up at my page on Whitehall Palace (which includes a newspaper announcement about one of the king's spaniels going missing), and... you get the idea by now. I have this vision of men in raincoats looking terribly disappointed.

JM: *I'm only dressed this way because it looks like rain! Now, you've written a couple of other novels. One was a TV novelization, of a Cracker story. There's quite a bit of extra material in there: character development that's not in the original script.*

MB: You have no idea how I envy those fast writers who can knock out a couple of thousand words before breakfast when I've been known to take half a year to write a 5,000-word short story. Where I got the idea I could write a novel in eight weeks, I don't know. To return to the 17th century for a moment, I must have got "a maggot in my head." But I managed to convince myself that it would be a simple matter of copy-typing the script, adding the occasional "he or she said," plus a bit of "the restaurant was crowded" and "her dress was yellow."

So that's what I did; I even threw in a bit of "he thought" and "she thought." And six weeks later, it was finished. I'd covered the whole three-hour story. And the book was less than 45,000 words long. According to the writer's guidelines I'd been given, the minimum acceptable word count was 80,000. Also, I wasn't supposed to change any element of, or add anything to, the original story. So there I was, two weeks away from the deadline and 35,000 words short. I had no idea what to do. Did you ever see Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*? That was me: foaming at the mouth and raving mad.

It was while I was in this Jack Nicholson phase that the editor phoned to ask how I was doing. He made several useful suggestions as to how to get around the problem, and most importantly, he agreed to let me add extra plotlines that had not been in the original story. I spent the next two weeks adding stuff like a police operation to arrest pickpockets, a humorous vignette about a burglary investigation and a subplot about anorexia. What's funny is that some people who actually saw the TV show don't realize these scenes were not part of the original programme.

JM: *Was this kind of work-for-hire writing a positive experience? Rather than getting a real job, for instance?*

MB: By the time I'd finished that book, I was so sick of *Cracker* that if I'd run into Robbie Coltrane on the street I would have punched him. But then I defy anyone to spend two

months in a darkened room, watching the same video over and over again, and not come out a little strange.

Just in case Robbie Coltrane subscribes to *Interzone*, I'd like him to know that he's in no danger whatsoever. I've long since recovered from my two months in the dark and have returned to my original opinion of him as a lovely man who I wouldn't dream of hitting.

If I can be serious for a moment, there are a lot of positive aspects to

...if I'd run into  
Robbie Coltrane on  
the street, I would  
have punched him."

writing a novelization. For one thing, it's a good way for a lesser-known writer to accumulate some publishing credits. For another, it's fairly certain all the major booksellers will stock it, while there's no guarantee they will stock an original novel by someone they've never heard of. And if you're the type of person who can write quickly to a strict deadline and follow guidelines, it's a great way of making a bit of extra cash.

The trouble with me is I do not write quickly and I hate both deadlines and guidelines. If you swear you will never do a particular thing again, you always end up doing it. So I won't swear that I will never write a novelization again, but if I'm going to drive myself crazy, I think I'd rather go insane working on my own visions rather than someone else's.

And as for "real" jobs, I've had enough of them to know that you can't get away with taking your time the way you can in writing fiction. I've been a naturally slow writer for seven or eight years now, but I didn't last long as a naturally slow waitress.

JM: *Catering's loss is literature's gain! Dare I ask how long it took to write Virus? After all, it's "only" a Young-Adult SF novel.*

MB: What's more significant than how long it took to write it is how long it took to sell it. I finished the

book in 1988; after six years of collecting rejection slips, it was finally accepted by a publisher in 1994.

JM: *It does have a sense of eeriness, with a depopulated post-war Chicago, and a rather messy neo-Luddite climax.*

MB: Neo-Luddite? Nah. I think the most sympathetic character in the book is the robot doorman. *Virus* isn't about techno-fear, it's about the aftermath of a conflict where both sides have attempted genocide. It didn't start out as a children's book. I had to make a number of changes in order to make it suitable for ten-year-olds, one of which was simplifying the plot.

Another major change was the age of the heroine. In my original version, she was a 42-year-old divorcee with a grown-up son and a kinky past that has left her with a mixture of guilt, paranoia, and strange fantasies. She was also having an affair with a much younger man. All that had to go when rewriting for the kiddies, as did the four-letter words and much of the violence. By the time *Virus* was published the heroine had become an 18-year-old virgin and the story was several thousand words shorter.

JM: *The good Molly Brown finally wins out! What's your next major project?*

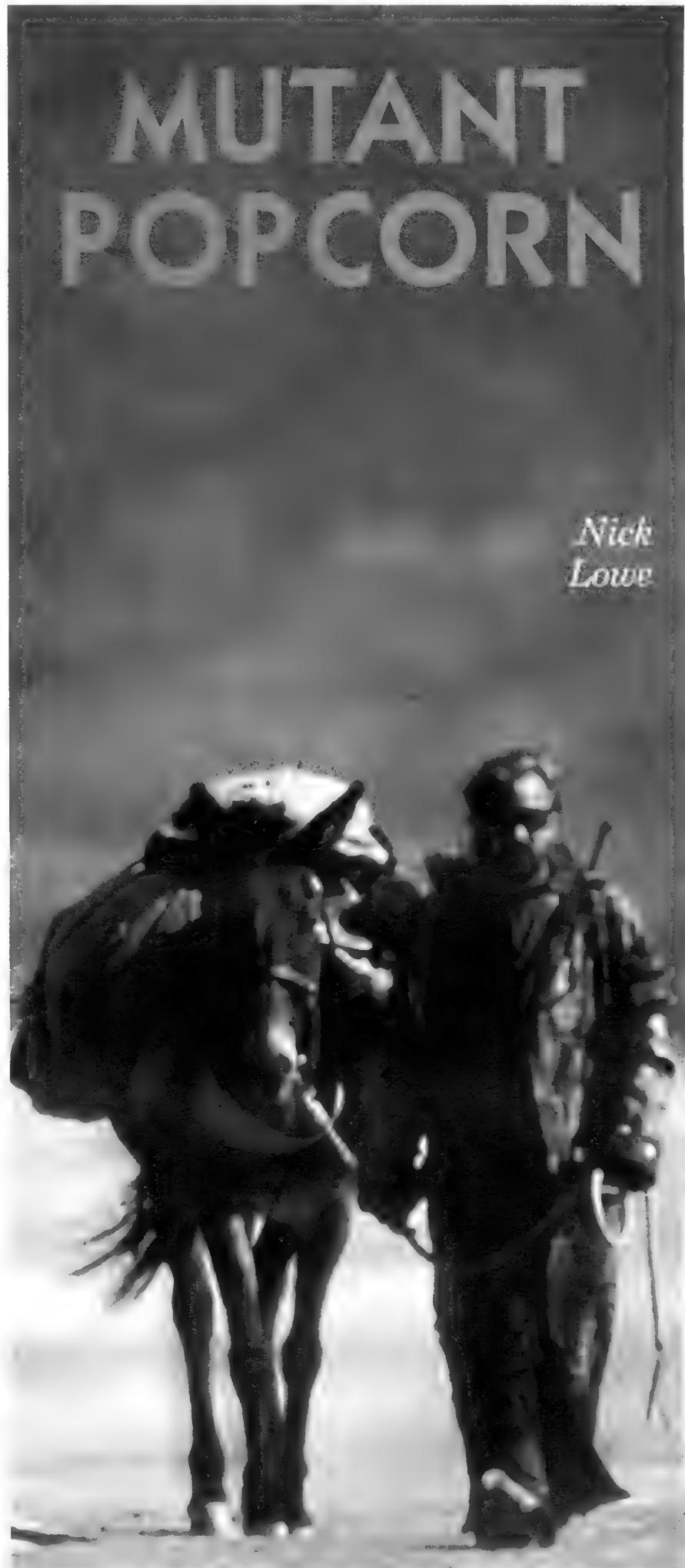
MB: I'm working on a kind of sf/adventure novel which I think is going to be a lot of fun. I don't want to give the plot away, but it's got a lot of action, some nasty bits, some laughs, a happy ending and no plans for a sequel.

**Note:** *Invitation to a Funeral* is published by Gollancz; *Virus* is published by Point SF, and *Cracker: To Say I Love You* is published by Virgin. Molly Brown's web site is at [www.okima.com](http://www.okima.com).



You had to be up early to catch *The Postman*. True to its own legend, the film made a fleeting, furtive appearance in a few of our towns and disappeared before its existence could be verified, leaving only a rumour behind of an epic figure lost in the wilderness with little hope of ever being seen again. Inevitably, membership of the privileged handful who have actually clapped eyes on *The Postman* tends to inflate the stature and significance of what we may have seen. Three-hour sf epics are sufficiently few on the ground to make the venal inanities and self-indulgences of *The Postman* comparatively inoffensive; and it's hard to harden heart entirely against an A-list star and Oscar laureate who's prepared to stake, and lose, both his reputations on a film of a David Brin novel. It's certainly a pretty enough film, and time passes at its admittedly stately pace with less ennui than in many films half its minutage. True, none of the cast is terribly inspiring, including the director's front-of-camera alter ego, whose native charisma is trusted rather too well to carry a largely unlovable characterization; the plot is as mechanical and logic-holed as you'd expect from a film that provides a numbered list of its rules of engagement in the opening act; and it's an enduring mystery how such a unpitchable scenario made it through the system at all. ("Fifteen years in the future, it's like the wild west again, with isolated stockade towns terrorized by roaming gangs of survivalists, and our guy restores an idea of America by single-handedly reviving the US Mail ... No, OK, well, I got one about a crime-solving telepathic dolphin who joins the San Diego PD and gets partnered with a guy who likes to lunch on tuna...")

The main problem with *The Postman* isn't so much Kevin Costner, who's delivered more or less what could reasonably have been expected from him, as the decade-long prehistory of the project before its hero arrived on the scene to try and restore some illusion of order and meaning. Brin's novel was an eccentric purchase in the first place, and certainly not the book most fans would choose to represent its exuberant author in the all-Hollywood bidding wars – with its perilously naif central conceit (US postal service as heroic distillation of America), unfashionably rural post-apocalypse backdrop, and an unshapely plot pasted archly together out of *The Wizard of Oz* and the myth of the Danaids. Costner has evidently felt, probably rightly, that if this fast-aging and riskily left-field project was to come off at all, it had to be played for scale and mythicity, working the future-western angle for all it was worth, and shamelessly cashing in the stock amassed from his own earlier outings into mythmaking in *Dances*



with *Wolves* and *Waterworld*. Thus the landscape has been widescreened out, from sea to shining sea; the skies are spacious, the continent returned to wilderness in coast-to-coast national parkland, with population and technology slashed back to frontier-age levels. And the hero has become Costner's version of a hero, a flawed and marginal figure who attracts romance in his very effort to escape it.

Clearly a lot of bait-laying has gone in here to lure Costner aboard, right down to rebuilding the character and setting in the star's custom image. Thus Brin's character has been mythopoetically stripped of all name and history (apart from a puzzling gibe at "my little shipping clerk" in the final showdown, perhaps picking up something I napped through unknowingly). Predictably, the pages of the novel where our hero does a spell as a travelling player have been pasted at the front of the movie, so that Costner's Postman is a struggling actor thrust by fortune into wary celebrity, who comes to reluctant terms with the attendant responsibility by taking charge of the whole to realize his vision – not for himself, of course, but for the public he can't let down, the faithful fans who have been touched by his fantasies and inspired by them to build the better world he can't. ("You have the gift, Postman. You gave out hope like it was candy in your pocket.")

Obviously it's invidious to speculate how much of this shameless Costnerization belongs to strata of the script predating and postdating the main man's arrival; but somebody has to take responsibility for the fact this narcissistic self-mythologizing has stayed in. Still, it's not by any means a travesty of the novel. It's true that all but the opening third of Brin's story has been dumped: not a bad move in itself, if only it had been replaced with something a bit more deserving of the scale and ambition of its packaging than the bland, formula-driven narrative resorted to in its place. Nevertheless, as perhaps befits its message of charlatany come true, it's faithful to the novel in its very infidelity. Brin's 1985 novel, with considerable foresight, was already interested in the ideological base of the then-emerging survivalist militias versus the notion of a paternalist, protecting federal state; and though the movie has dropped the awkward subplot about the rebirth of a radical feminism, it otherwise remains largely faithful to the novel's romancing of the struggle between fascistic anti-statism and an embarrassingly misty-eyed ideal of a Restored United States. There are certainly moments of truly epic dreadfulness, of a kind beyond the vision of ordinary folk – particularly the moment when the

crowd responds to the Postman's latest delivery of hope by breaking spontaneously into "America the Beautiful." But it could have been, in more than one way, a much littler film than it's taken the risk of being, and might well have prospered better had it played a bit safer.

It's mean-spirited, in the light of all these worthy intentions, to begrudge the film's delivery man his little indulgences, like the inordinate number of junior Costners in the credits. All the same, it has to be said that his willingness to put his own warble to the end-title song is a disconcerting demonstration that the renaissance man's hyphenate talents emphatically don't extend to musical taste. Indeed, much the scariest thing about *The Postman*'s vision of the future isn't the wandering gangs of jackbooted militiamen, but the check-shirt revival and the frightful acoustic balladry. One would have hoped that a first-strike target of any apocalypse worth the name would be all stockpiles of songs with the world "lovelight" in their lyrics. But maybe this is indeed the real America, the culture to which the nation reverts once civilization has been wiped out. Nightmare visions indeed.

For obvious reasons, movie people are keen on the moral that dreams matter, that lies can be more important than truth and bring the real world closer to our dreams. (Indeed, one of the socially useful functions of the entertainment industry is to give all the people who believe this stuff somewhere reasonably harmless to go.) And anyone who finds *The Postman* a touch tacky, sentimental, and ideologically suspect has only to compare the truly reprehensible *Fairy-tale: A True Story*.

*Fairy-tale* is self-consciously aimed at a dual audience, and splits into two different films as viewed by the accompanying and the accompanied. Children – who oddly seem rather to like it, despite a far from kid-friendly pacing and emotional curve – are treated to a retelling of the Cottingley fairy hoax that suppresses any suspicion that the photos were fabricated (as, of course, was both confessed and proven in the little girls' old age). Adults, however, are apparently invited to divine that the title uses the words "true story" in a Lucianic sense, and to register the possibility that the photographs are indeed faked (as they were) with posed paper cutouts. The message then becomes the decidedly dodgy platitude that gullibility is good: that beauty is truth, truth beauty, and so long as your lie is pretty enough it's cruel to disabuse the innocently credulous whose lives have been enriched by falsehood. So when your eight-year-old asks "Mummy, did it really happen?" you're morally checked from saying "No, dear, the little girls admit-

ted they'd faked it all," because then Tinkerbell will DIE and her fairy blood will be on your soul forever. Yet even this is undermined by the uneasy decision to show the fairies objectively on screen – apparently under the dubious pretext that it extends the meditation on faith and illusion to the narrative spell of cinema itself.

True to its creed, if not to much else, *Fairy-tale* is a work of staggering dishonesty. Long-debunked period Forteana are paraded as verified fact, including eyewitness testimony to the Angel of Mons. Even the intrusive Houdini's voice of scepticism caves in at the climax to the party line that a falsehood isn't false if nobody's exploited. But the whole point is that the Cottingley hoax was a landmark in exploitation of the vulnerable and grieving, including Conan Doyle himself. Last year's *Photographing Fairies*, which deftly debunked the Cottingley photos in the opening minutes, went head-to-head with *Fairy-tale* in the US and came off rather the worse, perhaps simply because its more adult, unsentimental approach estranged it from any actual audience – though *Photographing Fairies* at least had the courage to pull the rug from under the Doylean faithful. In the end, though, neither film is interested in grappling with the story's true significance. Both recognize, for sure, that the Cottingley phenomenon needs to be contextualized historically in the belief culture of the day, attributing the contemporary floruit of Theosophy and spiritualism (quite reasonably) to the postwar hunger for a scientific refutation of death in the wake of the nation's largest epidemic of mass bereavement. Yet the real story of the Cottingley hoax is that for once, just once, *the children were the ones who exploited the adults*: that for two generations a pair of little girls successfully manipulated the gullibility of the grownup world to score a deadly revenge for all the lies childhood had been fed by its masters. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that that's precisely the story that nobody in the movie business seems eager to tell.

There are two things you come out of *Fairy-tale* thankful for: that it wasn't made by Disney, and that Robin Williams is nowhere to be seen. No such luck with *Flubber*, the latest product of the frenetic Hollywood quest to find work for a performer whose return on investment is not, on the whole, highest in roles as human beings. As a vehicle for the flubberly Williams, at least, *Flubber* is an invention as ingenious as its eponym. As (a) an Absent-Minded Professor who is also (b) a shy, solitary boffin more comfortable (c) riffing off cute mechanical sidekicks and CG super-

putty than other human actors, Williams is largely insulated from any obligation to act like a human. "I wish," he laments, "I understood human beings. I wish I understood women. I wish I understood emotions. I wish I understood passion." (That's four inconveniences that a movie about this character needn't feel encumbered with.) Indeed, far the weakest strand in this portrait of the autist is the half-hearty attempt at a humanizing romance, with a climactic moment of self-analysis that completely betrays such human intelligibility as the character has hitherto enjoyed. ("I'm not absent-minded because I'm selfish, lazy, or inconsiderate – I'm absent-minded because I'm in love with Sarah!" News to us, when we've seen him forget things for every reason *except* this.) Instead, the strongest character in the film is the unrequitedly-adoring girl-Friday robot Weebo, who zooms around flashing postmodern collations of archive footage for inter-

textual play, and whose demise is the only locus of actual emotion.

There are nevertheless, it should grudgingly be conceded, one or two quite worthy things about *Flubber*. It's certainly not often you see a Science Adviser credited in the titles, and there's some real attempt to get some elementary materials science across to tots. "You can phase shift!" (*Flubber* demonstrates.) "You're ductile!" (*Flubber* does another FX stunt gag to demonstrate concept of ductility.) Of course it goes without saying that the portrait of how science is actually done in academe is another nostalgic fairytale of lone inventors in Aladdin's-cave basement workshops, while prattalling gangs of industrial spies try to burgle the formula for nefarious commercial ends. Like the meaningless algebraic sigla jazzing the credits, this is apparently meant as a noble lie necessary to persuade the rising generation that hey kids, math is fun and you can get rich from it if you just sell out to an established

corporation with impeccable American iconicity like (here) Ford, rather than to sharkish entrepreneurs who simply want to STEAL YOUR IDEAS. As the product of just such a corporation, *Flubber* can hardly be blamed for promoting the myth that Ford and Disney, rather than (say) the US Govt, are the real institutions that define America, coming to the rescue of individual creativity where the state merely closes schools and slashes budgets. Like *The Postman*, *Flubber* is an attempt to redefine the notion of America for a society whose faith in government of any size can no longer be counted on: an idea of America that may not exist, but is nevertheless somehow more powerful, necessary, and deserving of our faith than any so-called reality. And if you all repeat with *The Postman*, "I believe in the United States" (yes, this line is actually intoned in the film), then maybe, just maybe, the fairies will fly again over Capitol Hill.

Nick Lowe

Below and previous page: Kevin Costner stars in and directs *The Postman*, which is based on David Brin's novel of the same name.



# Tube Corn

Wendy Bradley

There's a good joke – well, almost – at the start of the first episode of *Oktobe* (LWT) when the bloke from *Ballykissangel*, here playing a bored schoolteacher, asks his lethargic class to name him a Shakespeare play. Well, all right then, any play. By any author. Anyone?

Nothing. Ask them to name a film with Keanu Reeves, though, and every hand goes up. As a Keanu fan (I may have mentioned this before?) I simultaneously laughed at the joke and winced at the use of Keanu as a signifier of cultural dumbness, the opposite of the use Nick Lowe once

identified of *Moby Dick* as a signifier of cultural cluedness. And it would have been a much funnier joke if, at the name of Keanu, every schoolboy had chorused as one: "Much Ado..."

(Brief pause for flashback of Keanu in leather trousers. Kevin who?)

I wasn't warming to the first episode of *Oktobe* up till then: the opening "run around in a small war in Chechenya" scenes were very much of the six-extras-running-past-a-dustbin-on-fire school of film-making. And the acting was, er, frankly awful, particularly Lydzia Englert's signature gesture of opening her mouth to suggest thoughtfulness but actually coming across as vacuousness and Stephen Tompkinson's *drop head/raise eyes/aren't I sinister/well no, frankly*, stare.

The plot? OK, the bored schoolteacher takes up his pupil's offer of a pass for a conference being run by the pharmaceutical company his sister works for so that the bored teacher can have another go at chatting up the sister. "Go on, Jim," says the boy cheerfully, "what's the worst that can happen?"

Loud groans and eye-rolling from the audience who are by now thinking, well, the pharmaceutical company could turn out to be a bunch of sinister thugs operating out of a mountain-top castle reached only by a single-track railway and peopled largely by sinister German-accented blokes with staring eyes and villainously black clothes. They could, for example, decide (when they penetrate your feeble ruse after five seconds) not to throw you out but to beat you up first and then, when you run off into the bowels of the castle and find their lab full of experimented-on pooches, set Igor on you. And then Igor could whack you with a cattle-prod and, while you're unconscious, they could decide you're dead, inject you with a secret experimental drug and then try to dispose of you in the incinerator. Something like that.

There were several irritating plot holes. The experimental drug – a batch of "bad" adrenalin substitute – had been administered to a dozen unfortunate Russian airmen who, instead of being kept awake for their next mission, had instantly been rendered comatose. But the side-effect which had the drug company slavering with excitement was that, if you stuck a fork in one unconscious airman, all the others twitched too. Now, call me unimaginative, but I can't actually think of a single practical use for this, let alone one which would cause all this running round and claiming there were 50 billion dollars at stake. And how did the drugs company know that the drug was "reaching the unconscious mind" when all they had were a dozen comatose airmen performing synchronized twitching and a pack of howling dogs? Why, for that matter, did they care that

Tompkinson's character, Jim Harper, was running around stuffed full of their drug? If they wanted a live experimental subject why didn't they try, er, advertising for volunteers?

I found that my sense of the passage of time was somehow skewed as well. The drug company seemed to pursue our hero fairly efficiently. But he had time to escape to England, collapse in a heap on a coach, be taken away to what was presumably a mental hospital (as you would be if you started gibbering on about sinister drug companies and secret experimental therapies), be set up as caretaker of an enormous empty seaside mansion by our kindly therapist, make friends with the local ex-patient community, acquire a girlfriend and generally settle in – they arranged him a barbecue for heaven's sake – all in time for the kindly therapist to be revealed as a tool of the sinister pharmaceutical company when they turned up, jack-booted, on his doorstep. Maybe time runs slower (or is it faster?) in England than in Switzerland?

Stephen Gallagher wrote the book, adapted the screen play and then directed the TV manifestation. So, no, any holes in the plot are unlikely to be because he just didn't care enough. More likely because he cared too much: was too close to the project to see what did and didn't work. Maybe it brightened up in episodes two and three: all I had to go on was a preview tape of episode one. But I can't say I felt the need to make a note to watch the remainder.

But here we have a real-life, honest-to-goodness writer being given the keys to the kingdom, control of the TV adaptation of his own work: was it a good idea? There are some people who achieve, even in a collaborative art like film, a high degree of personal autonomy. Kenneth Branagh, say. Now, I salute Branagh for his achievements as a human being, and I hope he has a long, happy and successful life. As an artist, however, he has always struck me as one of those people who ought to have been enslaved by some giant studio who would put him to work in three movies a year until he had built up a respectable body of work. As an actor he is electric: as a director, in my opinion, he frankly sucks. So for the good of his art – acting – am I advocating he should be deprived of his autonomy as a person? Well, which is more important? Which comes first? Me, I go for personal freedom every time but maybe that's why I'm not a great artist.

I am not familiar with Stephen Gallagher's work beyond this and his interview with David Mathew in *IZ* 128 but the bible (well, all right, the Clute/Nicholls *Encyclopedia of SF*) tells me he wrote *Chimera* which was serialized on ITV in 1991 and also did

a couple of *Doctor Who* serials and novelizations (as John Lydecker). So for him to have been able to adapt his own novel for the screen and then to direct it himself is a little unusual, to say the least: I salute his ingenuity, persistence and plain honest-to-goodness talent in succeeding in keeping control of his project. It might, however, have been better for the *project* if there had been someone standing by his shoulder with the power to say "no, Duckie." No to the *Where Eagles Dare* echoes. No to Igor. No to the dreamscape sequences. No to Tompkinson's occasional lapses in concentration (getting his tongue round the term "Alta Vista" as though it were Serbo-Croat).

There is an analogy between the cost of film and TV production and the cost of clothing. In a way it doesn't matter of itself how much you pay for an item of clothing: if you pay £5 for a shirt and only wear it once you've wasted £5, but if you pay £50 and wear it a hundred times you've had your money's worth. In the same way it could be argued that it doesn't matter if it cost \$200 million to make *Titanic* if it takes \$300 million at the box office – cost divided by number of uses is the real indicator. What matters is the difference between what you pay for it and what you get out of it.

Which is all very well, but what if you can't afford to pay £50 for a shirt, or \$200 million for a movie? Maybe,



Above: Stephen Tompkinson in *Oktober*

if I were very poor but had exquisite taste, I could eventually save up a few pence a week and be an exquisitely dressed senior citizen: but what if I were an incredibly talented director but no good at playing the studio game – how would I ever

get hold of the initial \$200 million to make my blockbuster?

If the entry cost of production is too high then natural selection cannot be relied on as the mechanism for filtering out those who are successful at playing the game: on the strength of *Oktober* is it likely that Gallagher will get another opportunity of practising the craft of directing, where the entry cost is high and his success rate is, perhaps, problematic. But roll on the day when we have a multiplex of digital cable multiplexes pumping bandwidth at us like nobody's business. For what will be on these channels? (No, the answer I am looking for is not "repeats and more repeats.") As the cost of the tools of the trade comes down, and the number of people needed to shoot video decreases, and the number of outlets multiplies, perhaps we will soon see the day where one can pick up a camera and make a video as easily as one can pick up a pen and write a script. And then perhaps natural selection will be the mechanism of choice for filtering out the things we should watch from the things we shouldn't. Schedulers, your days are numbered: Wayne and Garth, get ready for your day in the sun.

I wonder if I can interest Keanu in my script for *Moby Dick II*?

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# UPGRADE

*Alexander Glass*

James MacRoth, the lawyer, looked distinctly uncomfortable. He didn't know what to do with his hands, so he gripped a sheaf of papers, holding them tightly before him like a shield. He didn't know where to rest his gaze, so his eyes darted from one part of the room to another, from the window overlooking the bright Arctic ice, to the door by which he had entered, and by which he was longing to leave, and finally coming to rest on the fractal network system on the desk in front of him. He was fascinated by it, and at the same time felt a kind of revulsion. His eyes traced out the tangled web of pale, fleshy cilia that grew in the fluid. He watched the tank for signs of life: a rhythmic throbbing of the cilia, perhaps, or a shifting of respiratory tides in the fluid, or the slow growth of a single strand. He was disappointed. For an instant he had thought something was moving in the fluid, but when he looked again it was gone.

Sharyn Anita Dee waited patiently for a while, before prompting him: "How can I help you, Mr MacRoth?"

The lawyer coughed into his fist. "I'm sorry, Ms Dee. I'm not used to speaking to a, a—" His head bobbed as he searched for the right word.

"A brain in a tank," she finished for him. "Don't worry: I understand. Please take your time."

The lawyer nodded, taking a deep, calming breath before he began.

"You know – of course you do – that our firm has represented the Dee family since as far back as 1984. I'm afraid – that is, I regret to have to tell you that you are now the last of that family." He paused, waiting for a response. When he realized there would be none, he continued: "Sharyn Anita Dee was killed in an accident on Europa. She was piloting a skimmer, which went out of control and crashed. I'm told the Jovian police don't suspect it was anything other than an accident; but the

full reports haven't reached us as yet."

"I understand."

"I have to inform you that you are now the sole owner of all moneys and property belonging to your, ah, your—" His head bobbed again.

"My late human counterpart."

"Your late human counterpart – thank you. The sole owner, as I was saying, excepting some very minor bequests. I also have to inform you of the consequent upgrade in your status. Not due to your new financial situation, of course: due to the fact that you are now the sole vessel of Sharyn Anita Dee's memories and personality. You need no longer be classed merely as an AI, but can claim Scandian citizenship as a posthuman entity in your own right."

Now he was sure of it: something was stirring in the fluid. One of the tendrils in the tank was growing. His client must be deep in thought, he decided.

Bateson, the Doctor, sat back in her chair and sipped at her sherry.

"What made you change your mind?"

Sharyn Dee laughed. "A change in the law. I want to have the best vehicle for my consciousness that money can buy. But I don't want to upgrade into a new, modern system, only to be told that the old model has full posthuman entity rights while the new model has only AI status. It's ridiculous. Now that the Solar Congress has finally passed the new formatting bill, I can get out of this tank –"

"And into another one," Bateson reminded her.

"And into another one, granted, but a better one, and one with entity status."

"What will happen to your old... body? For want of a better word."

"That depends on how successful the transfer is. If it's

completely successful, as my transfer from human to fractal network system was, then I might even have my old self erased. I don't want old back-up copies of myself hanging around, piling up behind me every time I upgrade. One emergency back-up, in the new modality, should be quite enough. The Neurosilica corporation wants me to leave the old system to a museum – not from any altruistic tendency, you understand: they want to emphasize that Neurosilica systems are at the forefront of neural duplicate systems – but I'm not sure I want to do that."

Doctor Bateson nodded. "I understand." She put her glass down and leaned forward. "I just want to make sure you fully appreciate the implications of this."

"What implications? If anything, the transfer should be easier than before. I'll simply be transferring from one system to another. There won't be any bodyshock. I no longer have a body to shock."

"That's not quite what I meant. I was thinking more of the implications of moving from a carbon system to a silicon one. The personal implications; the philosophical implications, if you like."

"Surely the difference is academic," the other insisted. "A neural network is a neural network. Fractal cilia are fractal cilia. They're there to store and process information. It doesn't matter what they're made of. You could have a perfectly good neural network made out of wood, if you wanted."

The Doctor spread her hands in the air. "Fair enough. It's just that some people are arguing that it's another step away from humanity. You might lose something in the transition. Even assuming the new system replicates all the functions of the old, no method of data copying is perfect..."

"I don't believe that. Even if I did, I've already taken one step away from humanity, if that's how you want to put it, by giving up my body. Another step won't hurt. If there's anything to be lost in the transition, I've already lost it; and I don't miss it at all. When can we do the transfer?"

Bateson shrugged. "As soon as the deposit's cleared in your hospital account."

N, the salesman, gesticulated wildly in the air as he spoke. He kept slapping the side of the box he had brought, for emphasis. Dee couldn't help but wonder whether this treatment might damage the machine inside. Each blow had the effect of pushing the man's body a little higher in the air, and, simultaneously, of sending the box floating downwards, towards the ground. He had to keep re-adjusting his position, and that of the box; and this he managed to do without once breaking the smooth, seemingly ceaseless flow of his sales pitch.

Dee watched him through various cameras. From one of them, she could see the back of his head, and beyond that, her own tank, safely anchored to the wall. It was still called a neurosilica, though the company itself had ceased trading years before.

She waited for the salesman to take a breath, and quickly interrupted.

"I'm sorry, Mr N, but I don't think I understand the actual benefits of owning one of these... devices. Explain them to me more clearly, if you would."

"The major benefit," he said, without any discernible pause for thought, "is undoubtedly the fibre-optic element in the design. Of course, fibre-optic computers have been with us for many decades now; but there's never been a fractal system that accommodated the idea, principally because it was impossible to create fibre-optic cilia that would grow and reproduce to form the necessary fractal structures. Until now," he added, a little self-consciously.

"Until now," Dee echoed. "And now that it's been done, we know that it was never actually impossible. But please, go on."

"So you'll have faster processing and a more compact design, which in turn means that the system is less fragile, more resistant to purely physical damage, as well as being much more portable. And since practically all modern utilities use fibre-optic controls, there'll be no translation from ciliary impulse to optic impulse, and therefore no time-lag between thought and action. It's the last word in posthuman consciousness."

"I think you'll find, Mr N, that it might not be the absolute last word in posthuman consciousness. Come back in three years' time. If I'm still in that contraption, I'll give you a bonus."

"You'll buy it, then?"

"I have a question first. If these things are so good, why don't you have one?"

"Oh, but I do have one."

Grinning into one of the cameras, the salesman reached a hand behind his head and unfastened his wig. It came away to reveal a smooth hemisphere which comprised the top half of his skull. Under the dome, a mess of optic cilia wound about each other. Occasionally, a dull red spark winked in the depths.

"Is that your actual body?" Dee wondered.

"A replica," he told her lightly, tugging the wig back into place.

"Why keep your old shape, though?"

N shrugged, still smiling. "It's just nostalgia."

The technician opened D's head and looked inside.

"That seems fairly straightforward. But I don't think we can upgrade your existing model. You're a little behind the times."

"I've just arrived from the home system – just got off the bus, so to speak. I didn't realize there'd been new developments while I was in transit."

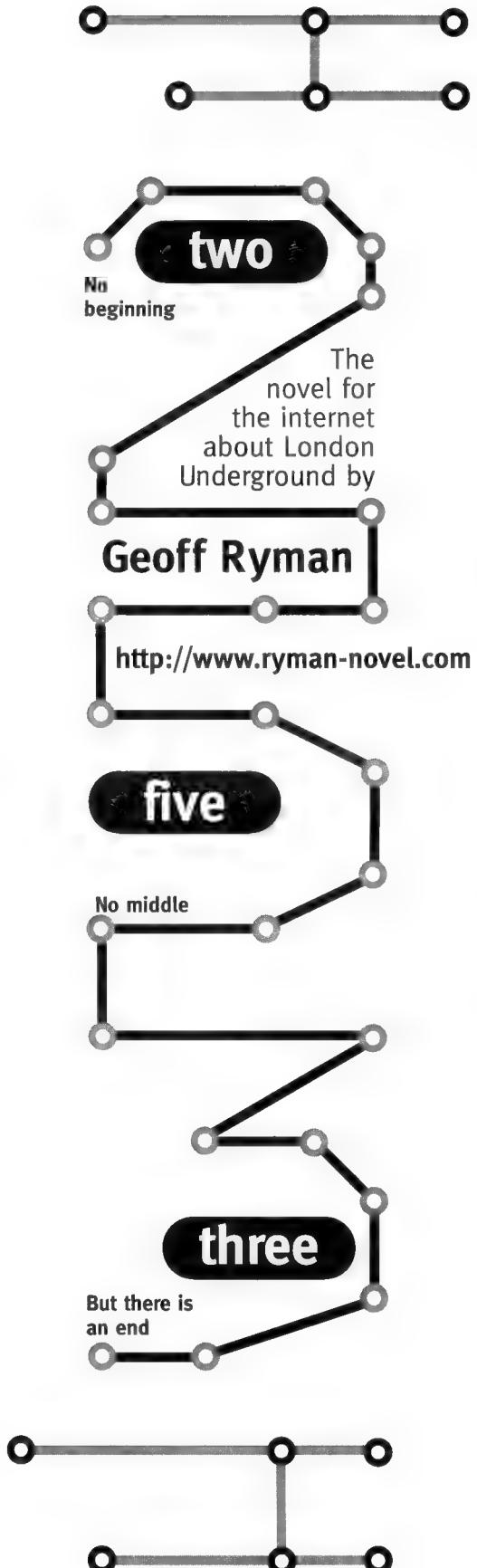
"Oh yes. Well, only one major development, really. The neutrino generator. But most of the entities here have been waiting for it for years, and already transferred into compatible upgrades. It's really only the people in transit who still have to be upgraded."

"Is it always successful?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Only because I saw a lot of bodies on my way here. Or shells, if you prefer to call them that. Some were posthuman bodyforms. Others were more specialized. I even saw a few art shells. I thought they might be failed attempts at upgrading; although now that I think about it, they might just be obsolete bodies that people have upgraded from and then abandoned. I suppose I'm a little nervous. It must be the disorientation of stasis."

"Another thing: there doesn't seem to be anybody here. The place is like a morgue. I came out to the



colonies to escape the overcrowding in the home system, but —”

The technician extended a pincer, and flexed it. When it spoke, its voice was careful, poised.

“I think you may have missed the point, just a little. Would you mind looking out of the window? Just for a moment.”

D rose and floated over to the window. She looked out on empty space. Around the space station were dozens of abandoned bodies, shells, floating in slow orbit. Other than that, there was nothing to see but stars. After a moment she turned back to the technician, seeking an explanation.

The technician was floating on the far side of the cell, obviously lifeless. Somehow, its consciousness had left its body. Or perhaps it had been destroyed, the mind wiped clean by some endemic design flaw in the neutrino generator. D experienced something she had almost forgotten, a disquiet she had not felt since she had been possessed of a truly human body: the awareness of her own mortality.

Then she glanced out of the window. One of the bodies, which she knew had been lifeless before, had begun to move. It was a maintenance caterpillar. It writhed a little, flexing its legs, and then formed its body into the shape of a question mark. Finally it threw one of its antennae back and forth, obviously waving to her, before stopping dead, as lifeless as it had been before. D kept staring, unsure what had happened. Perhaps, she thought, her own functions were starting to fail, and she was hallucinating. If her body had had eyelids, she would have blinked.

She sensed a movement behind her, and spun around. The technician bowed, its body pivoting in the middle.

“You see, we’re no longer confined to these rough shapes. We’ve progressed beyond them. Most of us now consist of logical patterns in the structure of space-time itself. I’m the only one here now, because I elected to stay and help those who were caught in transition when we made the breakthrough. I felt uncomfortable with the idea of leaving anyone still trapped in matter.”

It shrugged, raising its myriad arms.

D hesitated only a moment.

“All right. Upgrade me.”

“I think this might interest you. It might, at least, have some nostalgic value.”

“What is it?”

“It’s an old material structure. A carbon-based fractal network system. They used autogenerative organic cilia, in a nutrient tank, to simulate the workings of a physical carbon-based brain.”

“It is interesting. Is it still active?”

“Unfortunately not. But there is an inscription. It appears to have been a museum piece. Here: ‘Sharyn Dee, posthuman entity, circa 2070.’ Was that you?”

“Yes. That was me.”

“Do you remember it?”

“I remember. As if it were yesterday.”

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# MAN of STEEL *Saves the World*

*Don Webb*

*For the connoisseur of political arcana, few things hold the appeal of the diaries of Maksim Litvinov, Commissar for Foreign Affairs for the Soviet Union from 1930 to 1938. The translation of this material by Lily Fiebler has opened a new door into a hidden realm of history; some say it is a door that should not be opened since it shows great evils that are perhaps better forgotten – perhaps not even belonging to earthly life. It is hard to know what to make of the material – we at The New Yorker suspect that Litvinov's World will achieve a bestseller status, but that many of the darkest parts will remain unread. Despite Litvinov's background we plan to publish four excerpts from the text, arranged to follow the threads of certain world events. We will begin with what most people consider the most significant Soviet diplomatic initiative before World War II: The Mars-Soviet Nonaggression Pact of 1937. We have converted the dates from the Soviet "Scientific" ten-day calendar which Litvinov used while an official.*

#### **March 20, 1937**

I am waiting in Leningrad for the Martian ambassador. A humid sea breeze thaws the city, making all the buildings sweat, silvering them with hoar frost. I am afraid of what the Martian signifies. At first we thought that there would be a worldwide revolution months after our success. I recall the day Mr Wells met Lenin and Lenin remarked that "Marxism was founded on the idea that humanity was alone in the universe."

They would not let me go and see the cylinder, but they've told me things about the Martian. They say that

it injects the blood of other living beings to sustain itself. The Martian doesn't like sunlight. It sleeps now in the Czar's palace, I will meet it at sundown.

I have been told that its method of communication is telepathic. As a Marxist I should rejoice in this ultimate sharing of thoughts and feelings – yet how can there be a dialectic if all is open? They are different than us on a political plane.

#### **March 21, 1937**

I meet briefly with Stalin before being escorted to meet the Martian. This was my worst fear. On a personal level I have never liked him. On a political level I lost friends in the purges of '34, the same year Stalin had a Moscow Patriarch publicly invoke him as "Our Father." Stalin told me nothing of his plans save for me to agree with any terms the Martian asked for. So when I was taken to its foul-smelling room, my mind was filled with hatred and distrust of Stalin.

Seeing the Martian – basically a huge pulsating brain supported on weak limbs – was not too terrible, but when it touched my mind words cannot begin to explain my revulsion. It was not unlike suddenly coming into contact with human filth. But that can be washed away – an experience of the mind returns every time one thinks back on it.

It found my hatred of Stalin amusing. In its world where all thoughts touch all other thoughts hatred is the norm, the key to motivation and survival. Most of its thoughts-feelings were about the oppressive feeling of gravity. Some were concerned with what it would feel

like to inject my blood into its veins. There was some concern that Stalin refused to meet it – some wonder at what his plan was. But this was an intellectual concern only – what harm could puny humans do to Martians?

Its terms were simple. The Martians would launch their cylinders next year when the Earth and Mars were in conjunction. They would begin their attack on the eastern sea board of the United States of America. They simply would not land an attack force in the Soviet Union. In exchange for not decimating the Soviet Union, they expected the Red Army to become a worldwide police force helping them subjugate the human population, until sufficient numbers of their own race had made the journey across space.

They had chosen the Soviet Union as an ally because of its land mass, and because of Stalin's efficient collectivization of the peasants.

Per Stalin's instructions, I agreed to its terms. We are to be cattle.

### **March 22, 1937**

I requested to see Stalin today. He refused to see me, but sent a note saying that everything I did would promote the "people's cause." A second note arrived about four in the afternoon telling me that I was to have another session with the Martian tomorrow night. An hour later two NKVD officers searched my room removing a pistol I had kept since the Revolution. They did not take the diary; although they read it. I am a dead man now. I had not thought of suicide until they took my gun. An NKVD officer is stationed outside my door. How am I to be a prisoner of the people and also their representative?

### **March 23, 1937**

The mind of the Martian was terrible. It felt like a stone at first – a stone in the centre of my head pushing against my brain. It began growing turning my brains to mush. I felt like my brains were pouring out my ears. After a moment, "I" wasn't there. All I was was the Martian. It was trying to figure out how Stalin was planning to cheat on the treaty. The Martian feared that if it did not ascertain the plans of men, it would be punished. When it had looked everywhere in my mind (including some memories I had wished to never look at again – I remembered that really bad winter in Leningrad when we had to glue the few newspapers we had on the walls with flour paste. Lenin had said it was our duty to be sure that the word was read by everyone. Horseflesh was a delicacy. We fried it in soap – then boiled it in vinegar to remove the soap taste.)

It stepped out of my mind and I fell because "I" couldn't get in control of my body. A couple of agents dragged me away. Until dawn I was in some holding cell somewhere – then they took me to Stalin.

He questioned me for three hours about the *range* and *nature* of the telepathy. I told him again and again that I didn't know, but I was sure that it was unable to read Stalin's mind or it wouldn't have searched my mind. The telepathy might be by invitation only.

Finally he seemed to relax.

He told me that I wouldn't have to see the Martian again.

He said that I would be a People's Hero.

### **April 1, 1937**

I heard that the Martian cylinder departed Earth today. It had given a demonstration of its heat ray to the Red Army. This is supposed to be very secret, but my contacts were very frightened by the display. Stalin has told them that when the Martians come they will give the heat ray to the Red Army. If the heat ray is the best of Martian technologies, they won't be giving it away.

Stalin is building a permanent radio installation for communication with the Martians.

### **April 27, 1937**

Stalin sent for Eisenstein today. He's going to have Eisenstein make a propaganda film to create hatred against the Martians, and a second film to show Stalin as the world saviour that defeated the Martians. Clearly he has lost his mind. I wonder if the Martians are a vengeful people who will single him out for this nonsense.

### **May 5, 1937**

Today I met Eisenstein. He's had a great time in Mexico. His tales of his time in Hollywood do make me glad that the Martians intend to make America the first target. If Hollywood were allowed to continue it would become a cancer to the mind of mankind. Of course there will be no mankind in a few years. Eisenstein told me that Stalin had picked titles for the two films. *Mars Isn't Red* and *Man of Steel Saves World*. The last is a play on Stalin's name. Eisenstein is going to get Theremin to make a device to produce "extraterrestrial" sounds – sweeping arpeggios and glissandos surreal for Prokofiev's score. He wanted my visual impressions of the Martian. I became ill as I talked about the skin like wet leather, the drooling wedge-shaped mouth, the three-lobed eyes, the pulsing heaving mass, like a massive brain of incalculable evil.

### **July 12, 1937**

...after Stalin finished my report on unrest in Germany, he became sly and coy. Did I remember the Martians? he asked. I commented that I was unlikely to forget such things. He invited me to visit the sets of Eisenstein's movie. We drove out to the suburbs of Moscow. The movie Martian didn't have the correct degree of loathsomeness. Two men in a leather bag struggle to represent the Martian's brain, while it gave a speech supporting capitalism. The comrade-hero breaks free from his bonds to grab a sickle – the whole scene is in a Martian museum of mankind – and begins cutting the "fearsome" monster.

I tried to explain that this simple heroic film didn't begin to explain the true horror. Stalin laughed at me, telling me that I didn't understand propaganda. I told him that he didn't have a chance to get them. Sure they might use the Red Army to help in their subjugation of the Earth, he just laughed again and told me that I did not understand political realities.

### **November 1, 1937**

Today is a year till the landing of the Martians and all Stalin wants to know about is Germany. Really his objection is the "picture tube." That Hitler's scientists invented the picture tube so that the 1936 Olympic Games could be *televised*. Soviet science should have

invented the picture tube, not the Nazis. I pointed out that Soviet science had a year to save us from the Martians. He said Soviet biological science would save us. I would see, he said. I had been too much of a nay-sayer. The Martian invasion was key to removing the Nazi menace. I should be glad, he said, since I was a Jew. Then the question of the Sudetenland was reopened and Stalin said...

### December 12, 1937

He is replacing me. He said that he needs someone to deal with the Nazis. They're apt not to like me so he's replacing me with Molotov. He – a newspaper editor. But it's just for a little while, he said; remember our little secret, he said. An editor. Editors have no sense of politics. His damn film – he thinks he can incite the masses against the Martians. Might as well write a Communist fairy book, *Tale of the Sudden Sweetness of the Dictator*. Suddenly I realize how free I am. For many months I would have been afraid to write like this even in my own diary. But the knowledge that the Martians are coming makes me free. I am not worried about what my big brother Joseph knows.

But what can I do with this freedom? Should I wander the frost-covered night yelling to my comrades – be free! Be free! If the police didn't get me, some worker raised from his proper Communist slumbers would bean me with a piece of good Soviet furniture.

### January 1, 1938

Today there was a screening of Eisenstein's films. I refused to attend. When all the humans are drained of their blood, who will say Kaddish? Are there ten good men among the Martians?

### April 3, 1938

Today I saw an American-made film, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Fredric March portrayed the title character. I want to use my special knowledge to be Mr Hyde. I want to be a great wild beast – but I am still afraid.

### May 5, 1938

Stalin took me to an unnamed hospital at the outskirts of Moscow. The smells of ammonia, then the endless paint-peeling corridors, smells of urine, faeces, vomit, no lighting, peasants with swollen red faces, moans, screams, some of the rooms had animals – cows. Then in the unforgivable heart of this labyrinth two Army guards who stood at attention at the sight of Stalin. The man-of-steel hadn't shown anything but a mounting excitement. When we reached this inner sanctum he asked, "Have you heard of the work of Comrade Michurin?"

I admitted my ignorance.

"Michurin developed a theory of genetic dialectics. You inject a plant or an animal with the sap or blood of another type and you form a hybrid of the two. You are about to meet his greatest pupil, Trofim Denisovich Lysenko. Lysenko is a self-made scientist drawing his inspiration from Marx instead of the bourgeois academies." In all my years of knowing Stalin I had never heard as much hope in a name.

Comrade Lysenko was drawing blood from a great strapping Cossack of a man. He looked up at Stalin and smiled. No one else would have continued their work

when Stalin walked into a room.

When Lysenko had finished his procedure, he stepped forward and greeted Stalin like an old friend.

Stalin pointed to me and said, "This is Litvinov, the man I told you about."

Lysenko looked me over. I felt like a specimen. I am glad that I cannot read the minds of our own kind.

"We've been having some breakthroughs," he began, "with winter wheat. By collecting the sap of the wheat which grows in the furthest north, mixing it with extracts of tundra grass, we will soon have wheat that will grow beyond the Arctic circle."

I said something complimentary.

"Oh course you are interested in the Martians. We know that the Martians feed themselves by capturing men and injecting their blood directly into the Martian vein. While their ambassador was here I had him provided with an endless stream of thick-lipped morons with thin feet and sticky fingers. Do you see why?"

I shook my head. How long had Kafka been writing my life story?

"On Mars they have only one blood-bearing beast, which I have determined through Comrade Michurin's theories to actually be a degenerate form of the Martian race. Therefore the forced transfusions do not alter the Martian's genetic structure. However, when they come to Earth, slowly they would mutate into a half-Martian half-human, you see?"

I thought of the Martian bigger than a bear, his rubbery lips, his three-lobed eye. There could be no common ground.

"But it would take years. In addition, the Martians would first feed on the easily caught, the docile, and the sick. However if we were to create a race of Soviet Supermen – endowed with minds attuned to the great truths of Marxist-Leninist-Stalinism – and then presented these men to the Martians, the Martians succumbing to the dialectical vital inheritance would rapidly mutate into Comrade Martians, who not only could aid us in spreading the revolution to all of the Earth, but to space as well. It is the greatest dialectical moment of all – planetary dialectics!"

I turned to Stalin hoping that he would smile and reveal this as a joke. But he was as mad as Lysenko. Earth is doomed. It is doomed by two madmen.

### November 1, 1938

Last night the Martians landed on the eastern seacoast of the United States of America. A popular radio program of the Mercury Theatre broadcast some of the invasion from the town called Grover's Mill, New Jersey. The BBC picked up their faint broadcast and rebroadcast it through Europe. I put aside a little poison to take when the cylinders fall in the Soviet Union. Stalin will order the Red Army to move into Europe in three days.

### November 2, 1938

Today Hitler launched an all-out rocket attack against Mars. The unmanned rockets will carry concentrated viral mixtures into the Martian atmosphere.

It seems that in 1936 the Martians had attempted to make a treaty with the Third Reich. One of the cylinders had crashed in the Black Forest. German and Austrian scientists aided by an American medical student,



# A Single Shadow

Stephen Dedman

**I**t was November, which made it nearly two months since I'd arrived in Tokyo, and the local shows had been much funnier when I hadn't really understood them – but the apartment was tiny and my bed was also the Tanii family's sofa, so I sat there and tried to read. Maybe by the time I went home, I'd have learnt the domestic deafness which is the Japanese substitute for privacy – not that I'd need it back in Perth, but what the hell. When Mrs Tanii ducked back to the kitchen, I turned to Hiroshi and said, as *sotto voce* as possible, "Saw you with Shimako today. Does this mean you're back together?"

Anyone who thinks the Japanese are inscrutable hasn't seen one jump the way Hiroshi did. He stared at me for a moment, then whispered back, "No! Not me! Haven't seen her in a week!" and hurried out of the room. Miyume, his sister, glanced at him over the edge of her magazine, and then disappeared behind it again.

"Was it something I said?" I muttered, in English.

Miyume looked warily at me, then shook her head. "You must have mistaken someone else for him, Dai-Oni-San," she replied, also in English.

"Please don't call me that." Less than a week after I'd begun teaching, I'd become known as Tony Dai-Oni, Tony the Great Goblin-Demon. I mean, it's hardly my fault I'm red-headed, green-eyed, and nearly two metres tall, neh? "And don't try to tell me you all look the same, either. I know Hiroshi when I see him. He was even wearing my Cerebus T-shirt."

"There's nearly twelve million people in Tokyo, Tony-san," said Miyume, patiently. "There must be more than one Cerebus T-shirt. And if it was Hiroshi you saw, then it was not Shimako you saw him with." I could have corrected her grammar, but didn't. "You do not know her as well as you do Hiroshi."

That was true, but while I'm generally pretty good at remembering faces, I'm excellent at remembering pretty ones, and Shimako, while too young for me, was nearly as stunning as Miyume (whose name, aptly enough, meant "Beautiful Dream"). Okay, so I've fallen in love with one of my students everywhere I've taught – or so it always seemed at the time. Maybe one day, I'll find some way of knowing when I'm *really* in love, and settle down instead of hurrying to the next city. "Maybe," I conceded, just to see Miyume smile before she van-

ished behind her magazine again. I sighed silently, and returned to reading *Kwaidan*.

I've never been very good at researching the places I visit before I get there, and most of what I knew about Japan came from the Lonely Planet guidebook, a lot of Kurosawa movies, a crash course in the language, and the works of Lafcadio Hearn – a half-Irish half-Greek dishwasher, proof-reader and hack writer turned translator, teacher and folklorist (my sort of person, neh?). He'd written book after book of Japanese exotica ("Kwaidan" is Japanese for "Weird Tales") a century ago, and written them so beautifully that no one really cared whether the legends, poems and horror stories they contained were authentic. I lost myself for a few minutes in his story of the Rokuro-Kubi; when I looked up again, Miyume had gone, leaving the magazine on the floor open at the centrefold – a colour picture of a fairly pretty Japanese girl of about Miyume's age, naked except for a strategically placed octopus. Back home, it would have been considered pornographic, but this was a family magazine, with comics and a sports section.

One day, I thought, I might understand the Japanese language – but the Japanese themselves, never.

The next day, I saw Hiroshi and Shimako again – this time, at Shinjuku station. It looked as though he were following her, and she ignoring him, but that might have been some sort of courtship ritual. Suddenly, though, she ducked into the ladies' room, leaving him standing outside, looking foolish. He hesitated for a moment, then vanished into the crowd... or maybe into the toilets, or behind one of the vending machines; all I know is that he wasn't there when I looked again, a second later.

I didn't think of it again until I returned home, and found him watching a video of *Terminator 2*. "Done your English homework?" I asked, teasingly, as I sat down behind him. He reached down and handed me a sheet of paper. I looked at it, and then up at the TV screen when I heard Hiroshi chuckle. The T2, shape-changed into the brat's foster-mother, had just impaled the foster-father... which meant that the movie had been running for at least half an hour. The homework, even if it'd been done with maximum haste and minimal enthusiasm, would have taken another half-hour... "When did you get home?"

"About four-thirty. Why?"

I could've sworn I'd seen him on the other side of Tokyo at a quarter to five, at the earliest... and it was barely quarter past. "Any phone calls for me?"

"No," said Miyume, from the kitchen, before Hiroshi could answer.

"Thanks," I said, and started correcting Hiroshi's homework, wondering why he might bother lying to me. Maybe he thought it was none of my business – or none of *anyone's* business. He was only 16, after all, and Shimako already had quite a reputation as a heartbreaker: maybe the affair embarrassed him. But why was Miyume covering for him? Well, she was his sister, as well as a Psych major; she must have known him better than I did, and presumably had her reasons.

I finished correcting the homework, then reached into my day-pack for my battered copy of Hearn's *The Romance of the Milky Way* and turned to the chapter of "Goblin Poetry." It was weird, I thought, how many creatures in Japanese mythology were shapeshifters, routinely taking human form to deceive their victims – or maybe not *weird*, not in a country where gangsters openly wore the emblems of their syndicates on lapel pins, but certainly interesting. I didn't much mind that Hearn had decided not to translate the stories of the Three-Eyed Monk, the Acolyte with the Lantern, the Stone that cries in the night, the Goblin-Heron, or even the Faceless Babe, but I wished he'd been more impressed by the Long-Tongued Maiden and the Pillow-Mover. I also would have liked to have known more about *how* Goblin-Foxes turned old horse-bones into beautiful girls; it might come in useful...

"Still reading fairy stories again, Tony-san?" I looked up, to see that Miyume was standing beside me, shaking her head. "Are you ever going to grow up?"

"Sit down and say that. Besides, this is anthropology."

"Anth –?"

I tried to think of the Japanese word for "anthropology," without success. "Ah... you've heard of Margaret Mead?"

"Yes, of course: didn't she do that book about Samoa, after all of the native girls had lied to her?"

"Touché."

"I suppose you think we turn into cats and foxes when your back is turned?"

I smiled. "Only some of you – you, for example. You're much too beautiful to be human, but you could be a cat, a flower, a tree – no, scratch that one, you're too short." I glanced at Hiroshi. "Maybe Shimako's the tree-spirit," I said, softly. Hiroshi ignored me, but Miyume covered her mouth and laughed.

"I assure you, I'm quite human," she said. "I don't doubt that Shimako is, too. And how many girls have you used *that* line on, before?"

"I think that one's an original."

"Thank you," she said, too politely. "What line did you use on your girlfriend in Taipei?"

"Mei? I tried writing her a poem, but my Chinese wasn't up to it, and her English..."

"And the one in Bangkok? Or Mexico City?"

"What are you trying to do, write my biography?"

"I'm trying to understand you, Tony-san. Isn't that what you're trying to do to us?" She leaned closer, and whispered, "Or do you just want to sleep with us?"

"Only you," I whispered back, without any hesitation; Mrs Tanii didn't understand English, and Hiroshi knew how and when to keep his mouth shut, "and only if it's what you want."

"Why only me?"

"Because it's only you I'm in love with. Don't Japanese ever fall in love without burning down Tokyo?" In the tiny park near the apartment, there was a memorial to O-shichi, a 17-year-old girl who'd been burnt at the stake in 1683 for torching her father's house in an ill-advised attempt to re-unite herself with her samurai lover.

Miyume laughed, loudly enough that Hiroshi turned around to look at us. She glanced at him, and he hastily returned his attention to the television. "Of course we do," she said, in more normal tones. "We haven't *always* regarded it as the most important thing in the universe, or everyone's inalienable right, but then, neither have Westerners... and we no longer think of it as the great dragon-demon, either. It's just something that happens."

I shrugged. I grew up on a farm, didn't even see a city until I went away to university, and I've long suspected that romantic love is like traffic jams and good bookshops, something you're much more likely to find in cities and the bigger the better. If you see a thousand women on the subway every morning, you can pick and choose, or at least *dream*: living in a small country town, you take what you can get. Me, I'd chosen to spend the five years since I graduated in some of the largest cities on Earth, cities so crowded you rarely saw your own shadow. "What about you, personally?"

"Me?"

"Have you ever been in love?"

She raised her eyebrows innocently, and smiled broadly. "Of course, Tony-san, but love is one thing, and sex another. Please remember, this is not Australia: rents are high here, privacy expensive, and most of us cannot afford to leave home until we have been working for many years – often, not even then. Competition for places in the universities is much more intense – you must have heard of Examination Hell – so we have to spend more time studying." She pointedly didn't even glance at Hiroshi. "And our doctors will not prescribe the pills which your teenagers take for granted – perhaps because they believe them to be too dangerous, but possibly because they make too much money out of abortions. I know it's not romantic, but Japanese girls have learnt when and how to say 'no'; the meek little women who do everything men tell them are as mythical as your *kitsune*, *rikombyo* and *gaki*. In truth, we rule our men from birth; that's why they work so hard to keep what power they have, and why they never come home at night." Then she bent over, kissed me quickly on the tip of my nose, and ducked back into the kitchen.

I sat there, rubbing my nose absent-mindedly. *Kitsune* were goblin-foxes, and *gaki* were hungry ghosts, but what the Hell were *rikombyo*?

I found the answer in Hearn (where else?): a *rikombyo*, literally "ghost-sickness," was a *doppelgänger*, an apparition created by unrequited love, or the love for someone now dead. In the poem Hearn quoted, the *rikombyo* stayed at home with the original, both yearning after the far-journeying husband, but Hearn also

stated that "one of these bodies would go to join the absent beloved, while the other remained at home."

I looked over at Hiroshi, and shook my head. Sure, I loved ghost stories and old legends, but this was one of the most modern cities on Earth; it was like believing that there were vampires in Washington... well, you know what I mean. Besides, Hearn had written that rikombyo were "of the gentler sex," whatever *that* meant in Japan...

I continued to stare, until the movie ended and Miyume began setting the table for dinner.

On Saturday night, Miyume took me to a party at Tokyo University, to meet her Psych class. I was suspicious of her motives – Hiroshi had told me that she had at least three boyfriends at the university at any one time and was careful not to show favouritism to any of them, so this may have been just another psych experiment – but what the hell, I would have followed Miyume into a leper colony or karaoke bar.

Once *at* the party, Miyume disappeared into the throng, presumably giving equal time to her troika (triad?), and leaving me to dance and converse with a group of students who knew even less about Australia than I did about Japan. It was exhausting, but amusing, and at least no one asked me to sing; more importantly, it gave us a moment of real privacy on the way home, as we walked from the station to the apartment. Miyume had been teasing me about having drawn a crowd, and I was accusing her of the same. She denied it, and I asked, "So what were they? *Rikombyo*?"

She laughed unconvincingly, and said, "Of course not; there's no such thing. I told you that –"

I looked at her, and realized she was lying. She tried walking faster to get some distance between us, but it was a wasted effort; I could hop faster than she could run. "Then why do I keep seeing Hiroshi following Shimako when he's supposed to be somewhere else?"

"Then it couldn't have been him; you were mistaken..."

"No I wasn't. Was it a rikombyo?"

"I told you, there's no such thing; you saw someone who *looked* like Hiroshi..."

"Next time, I'll take a photograph."

"It won't work," she said, as we hurried through the park, and then stopped suddenly at the memorial to O-Shichi, her face white. We stared at each other for a moment, and then I asked, "You knew, didn't you?"

"Knew what?"

"About Hiroshi."

"No," she said, quietly. "I didn't know about Hiroshi until you told me."

"About rikombyo, then."

"Of course; I told *you* about them, if you remember..."

"They exist?"

"Yes, they exist," she said, heavily. "They're rare, and you can't duplicate them in a laboratory – it's been tried – but yes, they do exist."

We stood there in silence (apart from the passing traffic and the occasional plane from the nearby airport), and then I said, "Laboratory?"

"Psychologists have tried to create them, usually with hypnosis. It's worked sometimes, but not often enough for anyone to risk making a fool of himself by pre-

senting a paper on it."

"Jesus."

"We still don't *really* know what causes them. What do psychologists know about love, anyway, right?" she said, with a twisted smile. "We know they're rare – but even if they were one in a million, there'd be twelve of them in Tokyo alone. They're real enough to fool anyone in most circumstances, but they don't cast shadows or show up on film. And we know they're sterile; we managed to get a sperm sample from one, and no, I'm not going to tell you how. There are old stories about men and women having sex with them; they're – said to be very good lovers, because they're eager to please and that's really all they exist for. Rather like butterflies."

"And do they die after a day, too?"

Miyume smiled. "You keep saying how often you've been in love, Tony-san; does *that* die after a day? However long the love lasts, unrequited and with that sort of intensity, *they* last. Usually, they just disappear. We've never found a body of one; I suspect a lot of suicide attempts are really rikombyo, but that's just a theory, I can't prove it."

I shuddered. "What'll happen to Hiroshi?"

"I don't know. Probably nothing; usually, they just get over it, find someone else who loves them back, fall sanely in love instead of madly."

The shock hadn't quite worn off by Monday, when the rikombyo followed Shimako into my English class – but Domeki-sensei was too polite to mention it, so what was a humble teaching assistant like myself supposed to do? A few of the girls giggled behind their hands, but nothing more; Shimako herself remained as poised as ever. I was sufficiently startled that it took me (me!) most of the lesson to recognize the telltale signs of a teenage girl who's just gotten laid and is trying not to be too visibly smug about it.

I stared at the rikombyo while earnestly trying to explain Australian Rules football to the class. He was as inscrutable as the Japanese are supposed to be. I babbled on, wondering if this was a tremendous hoax; perhaps there was no apparition, only an obsessive teenager who'd skipped a class to –

No. I knew the Japanese well enough to know that this being tolerated, especially this near Examination Hell, was much less likely than a ghost in a classroom. The lesson continued harmoniously enough until the siren sounded for the next class – the second-last of the day, I remembered with relief. A moment later, I remembered that Hiroshi was in that class... and he always rushed there, hoping to see Shimako before she left.

Shimako seemed to be taking forever to pack her bag and leave the room; she was only half-way to the door, with the rikombyo puppy-like at her heels, when Hiroshi walked in.

Back home, it would have been the prelude to a screaming match, maybe even a brawl... but Hiroshi merely looked from one face to the other for a few seconds, his expression horrified, then stared straight into the rikombyo's eyes. It looked for all the world like one of those scenes from the Kurosawa films, the contest of wills between two samurai: for a moment, the apparition seemed to fade into the dingy painted wall – and then Shimako took a step forward, and then walked

past Hiroshi without looking at him again. The rikombyo followed her out. Domeki-sensei turned to the blackboard, and began writing.

I was on my way to the station that evening, when I saw Shimako again. The rikombyo was still following her, but this time, he was wearing a Cerebus T-shirt again, with a new pair of Levi 501s and even newer Nikes – way beyond the Taniis' budget. He seemed taller, too, with clearer skin: in fact, I realized, though unmistakeably male, he looked more like Shimako than Hiroshi...

I scanned the crowd for the real Hiroshi, but there was no sign of him. I caught the next train to Shinagawa, and walked to the apartment. He wasn't in the living room, or his bedroom, but the place didn't feel empty. I tried listening, but the traffic noises from outside drowned out any recognizable sounds of movement. "Hiroshi?"

No answer...

I stood in the living room for a moment, and then noticed that Miyume's bedroom door was closed. I knocked on it softly, and there was a distinct gasp from within.

"Miyume?"

There was a sound inside that might have been scuffling, and then, "What is it?"

"Can I come in?"

"No! Don't open the door!"

Despite myself, I smiled. "Okay... but I need to talk to you. Hiroshi... well, it's about your, uh, psych experiment. Look, I'll be waiting in the living room, okay?"

I collapsed onto the sofa, closed my eyes, and tried to think. Finally, I heard Miyume's door open, and then close again. I recounted the afternoon's events as concisely and dispassionately as I could, and concluded, "I guess the rikombyo's about equal parts Hiroshi's frustration and Shimako's narcissism, now. Is that common?"

"No."

"What'll happen now?"

"I don't know," she said, sitting beside me, smelling unmistakably of dynamite sex. "It will probably disappear before very long."

"Or Hiroshi will... Has he been home?"

"No."

I nodded, and opened my eyes. Despite her obvious

worry, she was still glowing and looked even more beautiful than ever. "Your boyfriend – is he a psych student, too?"

"No."

"You might as well bring him out; he can't stay in there forever."

She smiled hesitantly, and something went *click!* in my brain. I rolled off the sofa, and hurtled down the corridor.

"Tony! NO!"

Opening her bedroom door would have been obscenely rude even in Australia; in Tokyo, it was probably a capital crime. But I had to know...

He was red-headed and nearly two metres tall; I couldn't see what colour his eyes were in the dim light, but I didn't need to.

I don't know how long we stared at each other, but suddenly Miyume was standing behind me. "You said you loved me," she whispered. "Isn't it good to know you were telling the truth?"

I turned around, and then walked out of the apartment without another word.

The youth hostel had a nine o'clock curfew, which was ridiculous for Tokyo, but it gave me time for a few drinks and a decision. I was on contract until the end of the school year, so I couldn't leave Tokyo... but if I stayed in a hostel and stuck to a vegetarian diet, I could save enough for an airline ticket. It only remained to choose somewhere to go.

The more Kirin beer I drank, the better Taipei looked. I could spend some time with Mei, maybe get my old job there back... I changed a few notes for coins, and headed for the phone.

The phone rang five times before being answered by a man with a faint Australian accent. It took me a moment to recognize my own voice, and then I hung up immediately. Then I went to the bar, had another drink, and my shadow and I went back to the hostel and to bed.

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fiction

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<http://www.users.zetnet.co.uk/iplus>

critique

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insight

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# THE FIRST ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ART FESTIVAL *at the* Slaughter Rock BATTLEFIELD

*Thomas M. Disch*

**A**s they drove up along the Delaware, Professor Hatch would keep pointing out objects of interest, mostly having to do with nature. K.C. had no use for nature. He'd had more than enough of it growing up in West Virginia, and the nature here seemed pretty much the same as the nature there, except for the river, and the fact that things weren't as level here so the road had to keep switching directions as it wound around the hills. Otherwise, you saw the usual stuff – trees, tall weeds along the road, some big rocks behind the weeds. According to Professor Hatch there were no towns for miles, just a few scattered convenience stores and filling stations. All the rest was nature.

"Funding," said K.C., lighting another cigarillo from the butt of the last one, "that's been my big problem. I could be doing *incredible* things if I didn't have to be thinking about funding all of the fucking time!"

Professor Hatch nodded sympathetically. "I know," she said. "It's the same here. It's the same everywhere."

"For instance," K.C. went on. "With the blood. I don't use *real* blood in what I do. Human blood, I mean. I buy the blood I use from a slaughterhouse, and I keep it refrigerated. It's safe! But then I go to this nowhere museum in Omaha or somewhere like that and just because Ron Athney was there a couple months earlier and someone got a little blood on them... I mean, hey! is that my fault? I told them Athney uses his own blood, I use *animal* blood. Do animals have AIDS? So, suddenly I'm not part of their festival, and they want the money back on my air ticket."

"I've had the same sort of thing happen to me," said Professor Hatch, swerving to avoid a roadkill.

K.C. swivelled round to see what they'd missed. Raccoon. When he was in the driver's seat K.C. generally tried to connect with the roadkill by way of putting his signature on the highway.

"I've had *worse*," Professor Hatch went on. "I've had the police put chains across the doors of a church to keep my dance troupe from going in."

"No shit," K.C. sympathized. "Blood?"

"No, just nudity. In 1987! I can tell you I was depressed for a long time after that. And Alison – she's the co-director of the Festival but at that time she was my dance partner – Alison was traumatized. This lawyer, some official, I don't know, was reading this legal nonsense, and then four policemen started *tearing down our posters!* There were photographers from the newspaper, Alison was in tears, and I myself was frantic. They were destroying my whole life! I will tell you – that is the meaning of censorship. When two women cannot dance inside a Unitarian church!"

K.C. tried to imagine Professor Hatch nude, but he couldn't even imagine her with a first name. She wasn't a Miss, or a Mrs., or even a Ms. And he knew better than to ask where she was a Professor, or what she was a Professor of. She liked to talk but she wasn't interested in answering questions, unless they were the kind to keep her story moving smoothly.

"This Alison, was she much younger than you back then?"

He'd thought it was a neutral question, but the Professor gave him a dirty look. "She was as much younger than me then as she is now. She was not a minor, if that's what you mean."

"No problem. I just meant they will always use that as a pretext if they can. I know from personal experience: I discovered that I wanted to be a performance artist when I was 16, so you could say I was a prodigy. I was working with this group called Early Death. We were more of a rock group really. Anyhow they wouldn't let us perform in this club in North Carolina because I was underage."

"North Carolina: that's Jesse Helms, isn't it?"

"I guess so. The blood was a problem there, too. Anyhow, like you say, it's all censorship."

Professor Hatch piloted them through a green tunnel of scenery that veered away from the river to the right. The conversation had fired her up to cruising

speed, where she could drive along without feeling she had to keep talking. There was an alert, birdish glint in her eye, and the cords in her neck were stretched tight in a way that K.C. associated with being wired to just the right degree.

He smoked, she drove, the road unrolled in front of them, and then the first sign appeared for Slaughter Rock Battlefield. "There it is!" Professor Hatch said, hitting the brakes. The van skidded past the historical plaque, but she reversed until they were right alongside it.

The plaque said:

## SLAUGHTER ROCK BATTLEFIELD

In this area on August 15, 1780, was fought one of the bloodiest battles of the Revolutionary War.

Over 120 militiamen were ambushed and savagely slaughtered by a party of 27 Tories and 60 Iroquois Indians.

"You wouldn't think," said K.C., "that they'd want to advertise what happened – being beat by about half their own number of Indians."

"There's two ways to look at it," said Professor Hatch, as the van lurched off the shoulder and back onto the highway. "You can see it as our militia suffering a sorry defeat – or as the Iroquois enjoying a spectacular victory. The park ground has become very popular with Native Americans. They come from all over the state. But of course that doesn't make for a large overall annual attendance. I've picnicked there on summer weekends when *no one* visited the park all afternoon. As though it weren't *there*. When I made out the applications grant for the Festival, I pointed out that here was one of the finest recreational resources of Sullivan County going completely unused. They were spending thousands of dollars maintaining this hidden treasure, with its wonderful natural amphitheatre that no one ever performed in. What a waste! But also, how typical. For there is practically *no* art in Sullivan County. Of course, for me, and a few friends, that's been a kind of blessing in disguise. You see, New York State's grants programmes for the arts are organized county by county. So, if you live in Manhattan, forget it! You could be Judy Chicago herself and you wouldn't get a nickel."

"Judy Chicago?" K.C. asked.

Professor Hatch smiled a Buddha-like smile. "Judy Chicago is the Pablo Picasso of the 20th Century."

K.C. knew he was being condescended to, but he didn't mind. The Slaughter Rock Performance Arts Festival was offering him an honorarium of \$250 for his gig, plus bus fare. Plus, most importantly, a chance to be able to show what he could do as a solo artist instead of as part of Early Death. There were critics coming all the way from New York City to see the show – two bus-loads of them, according to Professor Hatch, who was the driving force behind the Festival. The woman definitely knew her way around the performance art world, so it made sense to suck up to her and listen to what she had to say like she was some kind of guru.

"Sorry," he said, "I didn't mean to interrupt. You were saying about how New York works things county by county."

"Yes. So, it stands to reason, doesn't it, that the counties with the fewest artists will offer the best opportunities? Over the years I've received grants as a

choreographer in Allegany County, and for my poetry in Oswego County. But it was opening the Slaughter Rock Gallery that's been the real godsend, since when you're an institution you can keep re-applying every year. Of course, I still have to do the outreach work, bringing the art to the local communities. There's no escaping that. And it makes sense: it's the people who are paying for our grants with their tax dollars, so it's only fair that there should be something we give back to the communities."

K.C. couldn't resist: "But I thought you said, when we was driving away from the bus station, that we were leaving civilization and that there weren't any real towns up this way."

"There are no towns – but there are communities. What do you think Sullivan County's biggest industry is?"

"I don't know. Timber?"

"It used to be tourism. But that was 40 years ago. No, corrections is the big employer here."

"Corrections?"

"Actually, adult warehousing of all sorts. There is a federal prison, and three good-sized state prisons – the biggest of them just for teenagers. Plus all sorts and sizes of halfway houses and rehabs tucked away here and there. Including one you may have heard of – Utopia, Incorporated."

"No shit, that's *here*? One of the guys in Early Death got sent there. The last I heard he was still locked up. So what do you do at these places? You go inside the prisons and do your performances there?"

"No, much better than that. We offer workshops. In dance. In quilting and poetry. In all the creative arts. It's been a marvellously successful programme. There is a genuine *hunger* for the arts among those who have been denied their freedom."

"Believe it," K.C. agreed. "A hunger for *anything*. I know, I been there."

"You were? You didn't mention that on your application." There was something taunting and maternal in her tone of voice that K.C. could relate to.

"I served time in a state home," he said, "around when other kids would be serving their time in sixth or seventh grade. So those records are *sealed* under court orders. But you want to know what I *did*, right? The basic charge was arson and destruction of property."

"*Plus ça change*," the Professor said, possibly thinking he wouldn't know what she meant.

"You're right," he agreed. "*Plus c'est la même chose*. In terms of the performance art. Though I don't think that would serve as any kind of extenuating circumstance with the family court. For them torching a building is a crime, not an aesthetic decision."

"That is the outlook," observed Professor Hatch primly, "of all but a very few. 'What thin partitions,' as they say."

She'd stumped him with that one, as she had with Judy Detroit, but he wasn't vain about asking to have things explained. How else do you get an education unless you suck up to people who know 1 things you don't? "Okay," he said, "I give up. *What thin partitions?*"

"Dryden," she said. "His *Achitophel*: 'A fiery soul, which working out its way,/ Fretted the pigmy body to decay.' Then, a few lines later: 'Great wits are sure to madness near alli'd,/ And thin partitions do their

bounds divide."

K.C.'s first reaction was to cop a resentment. He was sensitive to remarks about his height relative to anyone else's, and "pigmy body" had to be figured as a slap in the face. But this was not the moment to score one for the home team, so, filing away the slight for future reference, K.C. concentrated on his party manners. "I guess that's like saying genius is right next door to madness." And then, by way of putting a polish on the apple: "Thin partitions: I'll remember that."

Half a cigarillo later, and up a long series of switchbacks, they came to the gate of the Slaughter Rock Battlefield Memorial Park – a pair of four-foot high pillars of unmortared fieldstone, each bearing an heraldic shield of painted plywood. On the right hand shield a tomahawk, on the left a musket. Professor Hatch drummed her fingers on the steering wheel while a uniformed attendant lowered the chain that barred access to the inner drive. As they passed through the gate, the guard saluted Professor Hatch, a real spit-and-polish heel-clicking salute, which she accepted as carelessly as any five-star general.

After a further steep climb, the road split in two. To the left was Parking, to the right Picnic Grounds. They hung right, passing through another pair of dwarf fieldstone pillars to draw up beside a large Winnebago parked in front of a row of portable toilets. The side of the Winnebago was lettered "Slaughter Rock Gallery – Preserving Sullivan County's Artistic Heritage." Beyond the toilets, scattered among high, thick-boled pines, were some dozen heavy-duty picnic tables and brick barbecues.

At one of the farther tables a small tribe of Mohawks was enjoying a lunch of Kentucky Fried Chicken and keg beer. The Indians waved at Professor Hatch, and she waved back.

"They're not the genuine article, of course," she said. "They're our re-enactors."

"I figured," said K.C.

"There was never any problem getting the young people to volunteer for the Festival once they heard that we'd be recreating the events of Slaughter Rock. Of course everyone wanted to be on Thayendanegea's side and not a militiaman."

"No surprise there. Who wouldn't rather dress up like it's Halloween – feathers and war-paint and all that? And then, like you said, the Indians were the winners. That bunch over there sure started early."

"We should get started ourselves," said Professor Hatch, unlatching her seatbelt and stepping out of the van. "Or at least I should. I'm going to have to leave you here with Alison, while I pick up some of the others. Meanwhile, if we could get your equipment unloaded..."

Professor Hatch opened the rear of the van with a remote control device and then stepping away from the van, out of K.C.'s hearing, started talking into a cordless phone.

K.C.'s first concern was for the trunk that Liberty and Justice had been travelling in the whole long way from Camden, New Jersey. They'd never travelled such a distance confined in such a small space, and K.C. had been worried that they might get baked or would suffocate from being stowed at the back end of the luggage com-

partment on the underside of the bus. He'd wanted to open the trunk back in New York City, when he was changing from Greyhound to Trailways, but there hadn't been time. And when he got out at the crossroad where Professor Hatch was waiting, there wasn't time again. She seemed the kind of person who's always in a hurry, plus she probably was a herpetophobe. Lots of times people will tell you how they think snakes are so cool, the ideal pets and all that, but then you introduce them to Liberty and Justice and they'll go into shock.

They were both dead. He could tell without touching them. Any other time they'd spent time in the trunk, being bumped around, they would be hyperactive as soon as the top came off the trunk. Like as not, one of them would be curled up in position to attack, or might even take a lunge at him, forgetting about the steel mesh or just not giving a fuck. Not this time. They were dead.

K.C. did not believe in stuffing his feelings. When he felt something he expressed it. Any very intense or sudden pain took the form of a scream that started as a low growling, then took a yodel-like two-octave leap into a "Fuck this shit!" of high-octane primal rage. Even in grade school his tantrums had been legendary, but two years of professional experience with Early Death had perfected his native ability, and K.C.'s scream of grief for his two dead rattlesnakes transfixed everyone in hearing distance. Professor Hatch froze. Alison bounded out the door of the ID Winnebago. The imitation Indians sprinted across the picnic area, zigzagging between the tables, alarmed and excited.

With an instinct for the grand manner, K.C. took up Liberty in one hand and Justice in the other and lifted them over his head and screamed a second, even more artful howl – not as loud but shriller and wonderfully drawn out, with a quaver in it that would stop anyone who heard it in his tracks, like a baby's utmost scream. People are hard-wired to respond to that particular sound the way sprinkler systems respond to a fire.

It was Alison who took charge. She was a large, bottom-heavy woman, each thigh the size of an average torso, and she used her weight as a badge of authority. She marched forward, thigh by thigh, and took hold of the limp bodies of the snakes. "No more of this nonsense," Alison told K.C. "Let go."

He let her take the snakes from him and then, grateful as a musician might be for a good segue, went limp himself. Down on his knees with a silent wince of pain as the gravel ground at his kneecaps, then a foetal curl forward so that he could hide his face in his cupped hands and wait for the tears, if any, to begin. He thought of his own naked corpse, with all his friends and family gathered round (a trick he'd learned taking acting lessons at the community college in South Jersey), feeling guilty and regretful. Sure enough, the thought of his own tragic waste, so young and so talented and so thin, released the tears. Not a flood exactly but enough so that when he lifted his head they were there to be seen by the ring of spectators – all wearing mohawks and warpaint and looking amazed.

"Hey, K.C.," said the most elaborately authentic of the Indians, "get a grip, man."

"Jethro? Death Row Jethro?"

Jethro opened his arms invitingly, and, after K.C. had got back on his feet, they performed a solemn male

embrace, jeans apart, arms wrapped tight around each others' shoulders.

"It's been a while," Jethro said, disengaging and taking a step backward, "since anybody called me *that*. Here I'm just John." But he grinned in a way that assured K.C. that that was just a lie he had to tell for the sake of Professor Hatch and all the other Indians. It was the familiar wolfish grin of the lyricist and lead singer of Early Death's only song to hit the charts, "Homicidal Maniac."

K.C. wiped away his genuine tears with the cuff of his shirt. "You look a whole lot healthier, man. Compared to two years ago."

"It's holistic," explained Jethro. "You can't deal with just the symptoms alone, like in Western medicine, you have to treat the whole man. Plus, I've been eating a lot of food."

Jethro stroked the area on his thin, jutting chin where his goat used to be. Without the beard and with his irregularly shaped cranium exposed by the mohawk, Jethro's face seemed even more like a skull than when he'd been Early Death's lead guitar. The weight he'd put on hadn't altered his basic persona, he was still a living reminder that all men are mortal, some more than others.

"I'm sorry about the snakes," Jethro commiserated, laying thin, fluent fingers on K.C.'s shoulder. "But that doesn't mean you'll be left out of the show. Where there's a problem there's also a solution. Remember when we were in Winston-Salem and the amps got busted up by those rednecks? Wha'd we do? We used those car alarms for back-up and we had a big success. Right? Am I right?"

"Yeah," K.C. conceded sullenly. He didn't like surrendering the drama inherent in his grief for Liberty and Justice, which he probably could have milked for more sympathy, particularly from Professor Hatch and her buddy Alison, who were the impresarios. On the other hand, maybe it wouldn't be such a good idea to come across as too unstrung. Jethro's instincts were right, even if he did sound like he was whistling some limp-dick tune by Rodgers and Hammerstein: When you walk through deep shit, keep your boot straps dry, and don't be afraid of the dorks.

In any case, K.C. had a short emotional attention span, and after a primal scream had given his insides a good reaming-out he was usually ready to move on to new feelings. Liberty and Justice were gone now, no changing that, and he'd expressed his grief in a suitable way. Walk on, walk on, like the song says. The whole idea of performance art, as K.C. had come to understand it as a mature artist, was to deliver a gut punch, then step back, go somewhere else where for a while you might seem to be boring, and then when they weren't expecting it, Wham, a kick to the groin. Shock treatment. That was how a good horror movie worked, or a stand-up comic. Make 'em laugh, make 'em barf, keep 'em guessing.

So after being formally introduced to Alison (who was the strict sort of feminist who didn't shake hands with men but just looked at the hand being offered and nodded her head) and to the other Iroquois from Utopia, Incorporated – Keno, Duster, Winthrop, Lou, and Marlene – K.C. settled down with his old pal for a session of lateral thinking. At first Jethro's inspirations were all in the direction of nudity, which was no surprise.

Jethro had a big dick, and he'd always been the first to drop his pants at any Early Death concert. And it had worked, since it is a gross-out for everyone, and an inspiration for those who can identify, to see someone so cadaverous also so well-endowed.

K.C. had a hard time diverting Jethro to alternate veins of inspiration, but he persisted. "We got to think of something that will work with that flagpole. The snakes may be out of the act now, but I still got all these ropes and pulleys and the harness. They're a major investment, I can't just scrap them."

"Okay, okay. We're looking at a flagpole. We're looking at *you* being raised *up* the flagpole."

"Upside-down," K.C. reminded him.

"Right. Up the flagpole, upside-down. Plus, you're in handcuffs?"

"Yeah, but they're gimmicked. I can get them off when I need to."

"I got it!" said Jethro. "What's the most natural thing to send up a flagpole? A flag! We'll burn a fucking flag."

"You think?"

"I know."

"We tried that once at the end of our gig in Durham. It didn't go down so well there, if you remember. Freddy lost two teeth."

"But that was North Carolina, this is New York. We've got two buses of critics coming up from the city, and those dudes will have no problem with burning a flag. They're liberals up here, they get off on that kind of thing. It's like you'd be exercising your First Amendment, or the Second, whichever. And it would fit right in with the re-enactments. Better than the snakes would have, if you think about it. Here's a battle that the Indians won. This was their land before there was any flags or flagpoles, just fucking trees. And the Professor is very big on the Native American angle, so she'll dig the idea of setting the flag on fire, I can guarantee, besides which it'll give us Mohawks something to do besides scalping our victims. And in terms of putting *you* in the line of fire, it's as good as snakes any time. I like that: the line of fire?"

"Yeah yeah, I get it."

"And while the flag is being raised to where you're up there hanging by your heels, we can have Duster play a tape of *The Star-Spangled Banner*. The Hendrix version. Well?"

"Lemme think about it." K.C. took the last cigarillo from his pack and snapped a wooden match alight with his thumbnail. But instead of lighting the cigarillo he just stared at the quivering yellow flame as it crept up the matchstick toward his fingers. When the heat got too intense, he dropped the match.

"Okay," he said, having thought it over, "I think it'll work. Let's go talk to the Professor."

It was Freddy Beale, Early Death's drummer and resident psychic, who'd originally got K.C. involved with the Tarot. The first time Freddy had read the cards for K.C. he'd told him to pick a card from the deck to be his Significator, and K.C. had picked The Hanged Man. Freddy had objected to his choosing a card from the Major Arcana, but K.C. had never had any doubt in his mind that The Hanged Man had to be his Significator, because his first childhood memory was of his dad dangling him upside-down from a pedestrian bridge while the traffic

whizzed by on the highway below. What he was being punished for K.C. couldn't remember, and later his dad would insist that nothing like that had ever happened, that K.C. was either remembering a dream or else making it up. But the physical details were as clear now as though he'd seen it happen on a wide screen with Dolby sound: the perspective lines coming to a V at the upside-down horizon, and the cars hurtling toward him and disappearing with a whoosh and then a semi, sounding its horn like a blast from the last trumpet. Most of all he remembered the way it felt – not at all scary, like his dad had probably intended, but thrilling, like a ferris wheel. Years later, outside St. Louis, riding the big ferris wheel overlooking the Mississippi, K.C. had tried to recapture that sensation by hanging from the safety bar by his knees, trapeze-style, but before he could start spacing out on the visuals, the operator of the ferris wheel had freaked and K.C.'s death-defying ride had wound up in the amusement park's security office, which is not an ideal environment when you're peaking on acid.

This now was the best that upside-down had ever been, thanks in part to the equipment, which was designed for a balanced distribution of weight and minimum chafing, but mostly on account of the view. The flagpole he'd been raised to the top of was 30 feet high and situated at almost the highest point of the amphitheatre, with a view in one direction of the tiers of stone benches where the audience would be sitting, and in the other direction across the whole actual battlefield, which was enormous. "Field," however, was not exactly the right term for it, since what K.C. could see was a steep downward vista of trees and rocks and suicidal plummets. From where K.C. was slung in the suspension harness he could see across the leafy treetops to the actual Slaughter Rock the place was named for, which had been decorated by the re-enactors with various dead bodies – very realistically done up, at least from this distance – representing the Yankee militiamen the Iroquois had slaughtered. If he squinted, he could see one corpse that looked like it had been genuinely scalped. Professor Hatch's FX people deserved high points for that one.

Those old Iroquois had been into savagery, no doubt about it. According to Professor Hatch's friend, Alison, who was some kind of expert about the Revolutionary War and Native American torture techniques, the major casualties of the battle had all taken place right underneath that one long ledge of reddish-black rock. As the militiamen had been wounded in different other parts of the mountainside they'd been brought there for medical attention, and then, when everyone else who could had escaped, the Indians had found the field hospital and the 74 wounded men. And that was how the place had got its name of Slaughter Rock. As Alison had pointed out, history isn't always just a lot of names and dates.

Though K.C. was not one to pay much attention to nature and the weather and all such as that, he had to give credit where it was due, and this was shaping up into one beautiful day with big old clouds sailing by underfoot and a wind that kept swinging him round in unexpected ways. He started writing lyrics in his head, which was something he only did when he was in a special mental space. This one looked like it might be a haiku, though he didn't bother counting the syllables the way he would have had to do if he was a formalist-

type poet.

*Real is the crowd in the bleachers*

his haiku began. Then, after one or two false steps, it continued

*No less real the clouds*

*Sailing by my combat boots.*

Strictly speaking, the first line wasn't true. There was no crowd in the bleachers at this point, just Jethro and a few other fake Iroquois who were doing Tai Chi exercises on the topmost stone ledges of the amphitheatre, so that their half-naked bodies were silhouetted against blue sky and billowing clouds.

Freddy had tried to get K.C. interested in Tai Chi, but for some reason it hadn't clicked. Where was Freddy now? he wondered. The last he'd heard Freddy had been in a shelter for battered women in Biloxi, having finally got himself transexualized and then married to exactly the wrong guy. Talk about karma. Anyhow, he, or she, was probably still alive, which was one better than Gordon, who'd played rhythm guitar for Early Death – and Russian roulette, once too often. Right on the stage of the 4-H Club Building at the Linnet County Fair. Those fans had sure got more than they'd bargained for. And now all those screams and excitement were just so much nostalgia like the snows of yesteryear.

At first it had seemed an amazing coincidence to bump into Jethro this far away from the scenes of their old crimes. But there are no coincidences in real life, there's only networking. Jethro had explained to K.C., while he was being fitted into the suspension harness, how it was all his doing, Jethro's, that K.C. had been contacted to be one of the major acts at the First Annual Performance Art Festival at the Slaughter Rock Battlefield. How Professor Hatch had been sceptical at first but finally caved in when Jethro had explained about K.C.'s act with Liberty and Justice. Never mind that the act had never in fact been performed before a paying audience: it was a great idea, even on paper, and Jethro had even been able to dig up a copy of the application to the National Endowment for the Arts that he'd helped K.C. write up just before he, Jethro had been shipped off to Utopia, Incorporated. Professor Hatch had expressed a respectful admiration but it was her friend Alison, according to Jethro, who had gone bananas. "Darlene," she had said (that being the Professor's Christian name), "we have got to get this boy here. He sounds archetypal." Alison, according to Jethro, was the real decision-maker. Professor Hatch, for all her greater visibility (Alison tended to stay inside the Winnebago), was only following orders most of the time. According to Jethro.

So here K.C. was, by Fate's decree, and Alison's, hanging upside-down from the highest flagpole in Sullivan County in the State of New York, waiting for fame's lightning to strike. K.C. had always known that he was destined to be a celebrity artist on a par with Karen Finley or David Wojnarowicz, transgressing the boundaries, destroying old categories, bringing down the house. It was what his whole life had been pointing toward since even before the accident, so-called, with the kittens in the laundromat when he was only four years old. Back in France there was Rimbaud, and now there was K.C., and who could say for sure which of the them would make a bigger dent on the human psyche in the long run? K.C. was bound for glory: he

could feel it in the very fillings in his teeth.

A sudden gust of wind twisted K.C. around (his harness had a swivel bolt) so that he was, once again, facing toward Slaughter Rock – and there at long last, on the woodland path leading to the amphitheatre, were the critics, off their buses and being herded along by Professor Hatch, who was identifiable, even at this distance, by her peculiar hairstyle, which looked like a large grey doughnut on top of her head. The critics had stopped to admire the re-enactors, who were brandishing their spears and tomahawks and executing and re-executing the wounded militiamen. The spectacle was given a muted, ballet-like solemnity by the way Alison had choreographed the scene to resemble the clockwork motions of elves in a department-store window at Christmas time. Behind and to the sides of the cluster of critics were guards in urban camo, like the one who'd greeted Professor Hatch at the entrance to the park-ground.

The wind shifted and K.C. swivelled round so that he could no longer see Slaughter Rock and the arriving critics. His right shoulder struck the flagpole, but he managed to twist his cranium out of harm's way. At just that moment his earphones staticked into life. "K.C., can you hear me? This is Alison."

"Hey, Alison, finally. We've got problems."

"K.C.? K.C., can you hear me? Oh dear. I can see you, with my binoculars, moving your lips. But the sound isn't coming through."

"Come on, don't do this to me. I know you can –"

"There's always some glitch, isn't there," Alison went on in a tone of imperturbable sweetness. "Well, we'll muddle through. The show is about to get on the road, and I don't think you could be any more nervous than I am at this point. The things we do for art!"

K.C.'s mike, in the shape of a miniature cobra, was positioned right to the side of his mouth. He did not believe that it wasn't working, but on the chance he *wasn't* being lied to he spoke into the mike with the exaggerated clarity that he'd had to use when he was taking classes to become a TV anchorman, as though his crisp pronunciation might magic away the technical problems. "Alison, we have a problem here. My good buddy Jethro has decided to play some kind of practical joke. These cuffs he's put on me are not the cuffs I supplied him with. There's no spring, and I cannot get my hands loose. Can you hear this?"

"You're trying to say something, aren't you? But it isn't getting through. The artist's eternal plight!"

"Fuck," said K.C. feelingly.

"I can *hear* Darlene perfectly – she's telling our visitors all about the events leading up to Slaughter Rock, from the perspective of the Iroquois *women* – and I can *see* you, but not vice versa. I would like to be able to fix your mike, but there isn't time now to lower you and do that and get you back up there again, and you do make such a startling first impression. I'm chattering, aren't I? I always get like this before the curtain goes up. Don't you? I call it The Moment. It's not exactly stage *fright*, more a feeling that something unique and terribly important is about to happen. As though – Wait a moment, I'm getting something from Darlene."

The earphones went dead for a while, and K.C. tried to do the same with his thoughts. He was beginning to intuit that something was not right. It wasn't just that

Alison seemed flakey. The world is full of flakes, that is a given. But what K.C. was picking up was that the Festival was not the simple scam he'd been expecting, not just an opportunity to give the NEA-funded finger once again to the bourgeoisie, which is to say, the people who have to pay for their tickets. The organizers of the Festival seemed to have a more ambitious agenda.

Why, for instance, was Jethro, on the top tier of the stone bleachers, firing imaginary bullets in K.C.'s direction from what looked like it might be a real rifle? Jethro would mime taking aim and then, mouthing a *Pow!* inaudible at this distance, he'd jerk the barrel upward. K.C. began to reappraise their relationship. Jethro was a fellow artist, true, and in an ideal world there should be honour among thieves. But Jethro might well be harbouring a grudge toward K.C. with respect to how he'd been admitted in to Utopia, Incorporated, under a court-mandated order that allowed him to be detoxed in lieu of serving hard time. The last time K.C. had seen his old friend, on the night he'd freaked, Jethro had been exercising his right to bear arms, and his *Pow!*'s then had had real bullets attached, which were aimed at real people, K.C. included. Sometimes cops are the only solution, but even otherwise rational felons tend to hold a grudge against those who pursue that solution.

A while back, Jethro as part of his ongoing recovery had e-mailed to K.C., apologizing for the bullet-holes and offering amends, but what if that letter, so sincere and full of honest feeling, did not represent Jethro's final thinking on the matter? What if he was looking for a payback? And what if these new friends of his had agreed, for their own flaky reasons, to help him get even?

Alison came back on line. "It's me again," she said brightly, "and everything is all right, no need to worry. One of our guests was making problems. He wanted to go back to the bus. Which is not exactly possible at this point. But Darlene has things under control. It was the critic from the *Voice*, and we can't very well let *him* miss the show, can we? Good Lord! Especially since the *Times* never showed. Wouldn't you know. After all the promises! Critics!"

"Do you know what our major expense has been for this whole event? Catering! I'm not kidding. Each of the buses had to have two cases of champagne. Et cetera. But if we hadn't laid out the money and chartered the buses and *grovelled*, there wouldn't be anyone here but us chickens. For a New York critic even Brooklyn is terra incognita, and that has been the story of my life! But not any longer. Somebody has got to draw the line. This far, no farther, stop. Life isn't long enough. Literally."

Alison stopped talking but K.C. could still hear her wheezing breath over his earphones. She sounded like a car that had flooded its engine and couldn't get started.

While Alison was still stomping on the gas pedal, so to speak, the critics began to file into the amphitheatre. One of the critics began to make a stink when the guards – who were now serving as ushers – insisted that she had to sit in the area reserved for the press, in the middle of the second and third tiers. She wanted to know why she couldn't sit up in the top tier, since there was no one else in the amphitheatre. Unless you counted Jethro, who had finished with his imaginary target practice and settled down into lotus posture, eyes closed, chanting his mantra, which was *Hare Kali Kali Hare!*

The sound of the argument was drowned out by the opening squawk of the amps and then Hendrix's *Star-Spangled Banner*. A procession of local grade-schoolers appeared from out of nowhere, dressed up as little Pilgrim Fathers and Mothers, in cocked hats and bonnets, and trying to sing along with the National Anthem.

Hendrix was faded to allow Alison's much amplified whispery soprano to announce, "From the Benjamin Tusten Elementary School in Fort Tusten, New York, won't you please welcome The Thirteen Colonies."

The critics dutifully applauded as the 13 children came to attention in front of them. There's nothing like having kids on stage for making an audience settle down and behave, unless its dogs or horses. The critic who'd wanted to sit higher up had plunked down where she belonged and paying a bemused, condescending attention to The Thirteen Colonies, who had marched up single file into the bleachers to surround the critics in a loose oval.

Alison began a dramatic reading of Robert Frost's "Mending Wall" – "Something there is that doesn't love a wall," etc. As the poem was read, the guards erected, with astonishing rapidity, a real wall of spiralling razor-wire between the children and the critics. As the progress of the wall's construction passed one of the children, he or she would hold aloft a miniature version of Old Glory and announce which of the original 13 colonies he or she represented. Only little Delaware muffed her line.

"Well, there they are, Darlene," said Alison, unamplified, over the earphones. "Our captive audience. Didn't I tell you?"

"You're right, they just sat there for it," said Professor Hatch. "Amazing."

"It's what they're trained to do, isn't it? No critic will admit to being fazed, or shocked, or disconcerted by anything they might be made to witness. Besides, with that ring of darling children around them, waving flags, and Robert Frost to boot... Which, I must say, you read very well, my dear."

"Thank you. It's a poem I've always loved."

This was followed by a sound that K.C., if he'd heard it over the radio, would have interpreted as a kiss. Did they know he was listening? Would it have mattered?

"K.C., are you still there?" Alison asked, reading his mind. "Oh, I know – what choice do you *have*? But you mustn't think I mean to tease you. I actually have a great deal of respect for your physical courage. That's something I lack entirely. Your friend Jethro says that you are like the boy in the fairy tale who simply could not feel fear, or even embarrassment. I'm just the opposite. Sometimes I simply can't bear to be *looked* at, even by Darlene. So you can imagine what a breakthrough it was for me, with two left feet and ten thumbs, to become a dancer. Every performance I felt I was about to commit suicide. Well, and here we are now, doing just that! So to speak.

"Have you ever had a major medical problem, K.C.? Are you, for instance, HIV-positive?"

K.C. shook his head no.

"No?" She must have been watching from inside the Winnebago, which stood like a dam across the path leading from the parking lot to the amphitheatre. "Jethro didn't think you would be. He said you'd get a lobotomy sooner than have sex. The reason I ask is not that I have any anxiety against dealing with Persons with AIDS. It's

because it's so hard to explain what I've been through to someone who's never been there. Have you ever heard of Crohn's disease? Not c-r-o-n-e, but C-r-o-h-n. It's what I've got. A medical condition not very well understood. The walls of the intestine thicken, and that can lead to fistulas and abscesses, and that can result in peritonitis. Which is fatal. There's no certain cure. A surgeon may remove one section of the bowel, and then it recurs somewhere else. So... What is one to do? That's what I've had to ask myself. Submit to surgery? That's like telling a woman that since she *must* be raped she might as well relax and enjoy it. I don't think that is a rational solution to the problem. In fact, I don't think rationality itself is a solution. Western medicine treats symptoms, so the essential problem, which is spiritual, remains unsolved. So what *is* the solution? Art! Think about it, K.C. Art."

There was some art happening, meanwhile, in the amphitheatre, in the form of an old-fashioned square dance, the kind when the men wore little white wigs and the women had big dresses. Apparently, the Festival's budget didn't have room for anything but the most notional wigs and ball gowns, but imagination made up for the lack of funding. The "dancers" – two men and two women – were strapped into wheelchairs and they were being do-si-do-ed and allemanded at high speed by eight of the Iroquois, while, in combination with some jingly superloud harpsichord music, Professor Hatch spelled out the significance of the event.

"Before the Europeans came to these shores," she boomed out over the amplified harpsichord, "there were no walls. No amber fields of chemically fertilized grain. The dances of the Native Americans were shamanic rituals that united the dancer and her goddess, not geometric diagrams designed to subdue and deform the bodies of women. For the Europeans who came here in their Ninas and Pintas and Mayflowers this entire continent was one vast woman, whom they would bind with treaties and title deeds and claims of ownership – and then... rape!"

At this cue, the four wheelchairs were equipped with old-fashioned muskets that were supported on tripods connecting to the seats and armrests, so that each weapon would be aiming in the same basic direction as the chair on which it was mounted. The music changed from a square dance to a fife-and-drum version of "Yankee Doodle," and Professor Hatch read the verses of that song at a death-march tempo in her throatiest, most menacing tone of voice, deconstructively repeating some of the phrases, such as "keep it up" and "went to town." To this accompaniment the four miniature armoured vehicles converged on the front row of the amphitheatre, then tilted back so that the muskets were aimed directly at the critics enclosed within the circle of razor-wire.

K.C. had once attended a performance in Louisville of "The Cencis," a tragedy by the great French schizophrenic Antonin Artaud. At the very beginning of the play, two actors dressed up as soldiers had emptied their bladders into a plastic bucket at the side of the stage. For the remaining four hours of the drama that bucket just sat there, but everyone knew what was going to happen with what was in that bucket before the play was over, just the way you know when you see a gun in Act One that it will be fired before the last curtain.

The difference between the bucket back in Louisville and the muskets here and now was that there was no four-hour wait. Not even four minutes. "Yankee Doodle" came to an end – Professor Hatch was screaming "And with the girls be handy! And with the girls be handy!" – and without anyone having to pull a trigger (they must have been detonated by remote control) the muskets discharged, and the critics went into a state of panic. The muskets had sprayed them with pellets of coloured chalk, which, exploding on impact, had turned them into instant living bunting. That was how Indians of India celebrated the holiday of Diwali, as Professor Hatch was trying to explain, but K.C. seemed to be the only one there paying any attention to her text.

One of the women in the critics' enclosure, her clothes and hair red from the chalk, tried to tunnel under the ring of spiralling razor wire. The wire could not get a purchase on the motorcycle jacket she was wearing, but it did snag into her hair and her blue jeans, despite of which she kept crawling forward with her face pressed against the ground until she'd managed to break free of the wire. Then she headed in the direction of the Winnebago and, presumably, the exit. No one set out in pursuit. The Iroquois stood beside the wheelchairs they'd been pushing, and the uniformed guards posted along the upper tier of seats remained where they were, as did the critics, who didn't have that much choice in the matter, after all. Everyone watched as the woman rounded the Winnebago and ran out of sight. Only K.C., from his privileged point-of-view, saw what happened next, as Duster tackled her to the ground, and Jethro ran her through with a bayonet and then in true Native American style took off her scalp.

"If everyone would kindly return to his or her seat," said Professor Hatch in a schoolmarmish tone of voice, "the performance will continue."

The critics had not actually *left* their seats (with the one significant exception, who was being dragged to the parking lot by Duster), but they'd heard their colleague's screams of protest and of pain and taken them to heart. K.C. wondered at what point it had begun to dawn on them that they'd been cast as extras in a homemade horror movie. (He assumed that someone was putting all this on videotape.) For that matter, when had *he* copped to the fact? Not till he'd actually seen Jethro scalping the lady behind the Winnebago, really. And yet there was that other scalpee laid out beside Slaughter Rock, which it now seemed safe to assume was not the work of set decorators but a genuine dead body. Whose? Probably someone connected with Utopia, Incorporated – one of the counsellors so-called. There was enough free-floating ill will at any rehab to provide the psychic energy necessary for systematic mayhem. Rehabs aren't that much different than prisons, except for the way in a rehab they try and make you say how much you love Big Brother.

"We'll be raising the flag shortly," Alison confided to K.C. over the earphones, "but before we do, I wanted you to know how pleased I am that you've been able to be part of the Festival, K.C. In just a short time you've become very special to me. You have the gift of basic trust, as I do. I've always known that Someone or Something is looking after me. Some call it a Higher Power. Others believe in angels. Darlene has been both to me, especially since the diagnosis. *She* was always the one,

before that, who had such crushing depressions. She was the one that had to be rushed to the emergency ward to have her stomach pumped. And my role was the pillar of strength. I'd tell her, 'Darlene, your day will come. Your work *will* be recognized. You mustn't give up now, on the brink of success. Don't turn your anger inwards: *use it!*' Oh dear, our time is so limited, and there's so much to express, to explain, to celebrate! But Jethro and Duster are giving me signals. It's that time."

*The Star-Spangled Banner* kicked in once again, but at a very low volume, as though you were a teenager again listening to forbidden music in your bedroom late at night. Jethro and Duster emerged from behind the Winnebago with a flag the size of a bedsheet. As Jethro and K.C. had mapped it out, the flag had been stiffened at both ends with bamboo rods so that it wouldn't flap around as it was hoisted up the flagpole by the pulley system knotted into K.C.'s braided pony tail. At the base of the pole, they sprayed the flag with gasoline siphoned from the Winnebago's tank, and then, once it had been raised to where the whole length of the flag was lofted up and on display, Jethro flicked his Bic and Duster started hauling on the cord of the pulley.

K.C. knew he was in a desperate situation, but he had had time to think about how best to employ his limited resources. With his hands securely cuffed behind his back (and he scraped his wrists down to the basic hamburger putting that "securely" to the test), there was no way he would be able to get to the knife inside his belt buckle for some quick assistance. Which ruled out his being able to cut through the pulley's cord or the hank of hair that held it in place. An alternative possibility remained – sit-ups.

K.C. had always wanted washboard abs, and he never finished up every workout without 50 sit-ups on a steep incline. Not full inversion sit-ups, but the principle was the same. He had time for one good try. He turned his head sideways and tightened his gut muscles so his body bent pretzel-wise.

God helped: the double cord of the pulley was hanging down across the front of his ear. With a further twist of his head, he was able to clamp his teeth on both cords, at which point he slowly eased back from his sit-up so that he was hanging back in his original Tarot-inspired position. Directly underneath him, Duster was tugging at the cord of the pulley, each tug a little more vigorous and threatening to the integrity of K.C. molars. The burning flag had reached its full First Amendment glory, and K.C. could feel the heat and smell the reek of kerosene.

Duster, who was obviously the kind of person with a low threshold of frustration, gave one final furious jerk to the cord, cracking one of K.C.'s molars but at the same time bringing the burning flag down on himself in a bilowing bright extravaganza that could not have been more dramatically satisfying if it had been planned, though K.C. doubted that any of the assembled critics were making such reckonings at this point, for they were being squirted with kerosene by the uniformed guards.

"K.C., that was *sensational!* We haven't that much time left to talk, but if you do survive, Darlene and I have made tapes that explain everything. The rejections we've encountered as artists over the years. The critical sneers. The assessments of peer panels who never

came to a single performance. Basically, it's so simple. I don't understand why no one has thought to do it before. If one is ready to take a big enough risk, and to make real sacrifices, finally, the Establishment can't stop an artist from achieving immortality. Jethro understood that from the first, and so did Darlene in her way. Well, I'm getting signals again. It's closing time."

The charges buried beneath the benches of the critic's enclosure were detonated first, and the critics, guards, and the wheel-chair square-dancing team were united in a single, kerosene-laced sphere of flame that dissolved all differences between actors and audience, text and context.

The Winnebago went next in a blast would not have looked meagre even in a *Die Hard* sequel.

So was K.C. alone left to tell the tale? In which case what was he looking at in terms of fees from the tabloids, appearances on talk shows, book royalties, and, why not, a TV docudrama? Maybe he might even get to play himself! But no, he had to be realistic. He was too short for a leading role. His best hope was to share credit on the script. Even so, the whole basket of unhatched eggs had to amount to more than a million.

Perhaps it was unseemly to be focused on his performing career at such a moment, with the other victims of the tragedy dismembered by the explosion and still in flames all about the amphitheatre, but K.C. had never had strong feelings about other people than himself. In that, according to many of the authorities on the subject, he was not unlike other major artists past and present from Andy Warhol to William Burroughs.

His basket of eggs was not yet out of jeopardy, however, not while Jethro was still alive and, potentially, kicking. The electric motor that powered the winch that had lifted K.C. to the top of the flagpole began to whir, and K.C. found himself descending, a little too quickly for comfort, toward ground level. But a concussion was not what Jethro had in mind, for he braked K.C.'s descent some three feet above the flagstones. K.C. found himself staring into Jethro's beaded loincloth and thinking he was about to be the victim of the most elaborate rape in human history. But that wasn't what Jethro had in mind either, for he started the motor again and raised Jethro up another three feet so that they were eye to eye.

When someone is crazy, or very spaced, the best way to deal with them, according to all the police shows that K.C. had seen on tv, is to pretend they are rational. So that's what he tried to do. "So, what are your plans now, Jethro? I suppose you'll escape through the woods, just like the guys who survived the original battle here."

"I hadn't made any plans actually."

"Oh, come on. You expect me to believe this was all improvisation?"

"I mean, no plans for afterwards. I was supposed to be in the Winnebago with Alison and the Professor. There weren't going to be any survivors. It was going to be like Jim Johnson down there in South America."

"Well, maybe Fate's decided we're supposed to be survivors. It wouldn't be the first time."

"Fate, huh," said Jethro.

There is something about having an upside-down conversation that is very disconcerting. The other person's eyes are where the mouth should be and they

blink in the wrong direction, while the motions that the face makes as it speaks – the lips exposing and concealing the teeth, the glimpses of tongue, the lifting and lowering of the jaw – begin to have the hyper-fleshy look of a Geiger alien. Add a mohawk and warpaint and features as naturally Geiger-like as Jethro's and the total effect can induce a first-rate sense of alienation or, as they say in the theatre, *Entfremdungseffekt*.

"You shouldn't push your luck, Jethro. Even if there aren't any next-door neighbours that close by, there's bound to be some kind of official reaction to those explosions. I wouldn't linger backstage."

"So I should go hide in the woods? Live on berries and mushrooms?"

"If they think you died in the Winnebago, they won't start a manhunt."

"And why would they think that?"

"Cause I could say I saw you go in there right before it blew up."

"And why would you say that?" Upside-down and with the warpaint it was hard to know if the expression on Jethro's face was a sneer or a frown of indecision.

"Cause it makes a better story. When it's made for TV. At the end of a story like this you want all the bad guys dead."

"So I'm one of the bad guys, am I?"

The look on Jethro's inverted face was definitely a sneer, and K.C. began to see light at the end of the tunnel.

"You've always been one of the bad guys," K.C. assured him. "One of the worst."

Jethro nodded. "I could take one of the buses the critics came in."

"No," said K.C. "If you do that, they'll know there's someone to look for. What you've got to do is wash that stuff off your face and change into some regular clothes and toss what you're wearing now into the Winnebago while it's still blazing. Then disappear."

"And leave you to be a witness?"

"Right. But hoist me back up to the top, so I'm hanging up there when the cops get here. It shouldn't be much of a wait."

"I could just use your head for a football."

"You could, but if you do that, know what the result will be? When they make the movie about all this, it'll be Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis who are the stars. Whereas, if it's based on my version of events, it'll be a movie featuring Death Row Jethro – the first genuine mass murderer ever to be funded by the N.E.A. Is that reason enough?"

Jethro nodded. The basket was saved.

Later, hanging from top of the flagpole, enjoying the scents of the night breeze, K.C. continued casting the movie in his imagination.

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Thomas M. Disch's previous stories in *Interzone* were "Canned Goods" (issue 9), "Hard Work" (issue 17), "Celebrity Love" (issue 35), "The Story of Faith" (issue 82), "The Man Who Read a Book" (issue 87) and "Nights in the Gardens of the Kerhonkson Prison for the Aged and Infirm" (issue 116). His latest book has been announced as *The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of: How Science Fiction Conquered the World* (Free Press, USA, hardcover non-fiction, May 1998) – sounds intriguing!

# Point and Cringe: A Non-Innovative, Non-Interactive Column

*Gary Westfahl*

In one respect at least, Geoff Ryman has achieved the ultimate goal of any writer: he has changed the life of one of his readers.

That is, after reading his remarkable "Family, or, The Nativity and Flight into Egypt Considered as Episodes of *I Love Lucy*" (*Interzone* #127), I repeatedly find myself, at odd moments, pondering how one might recast famous stories as episodes of situation comedies. For example, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" considered as episodes of *Gilligan's Island*:

It is a first mate Gilligan,  
And he stoppeth one of three;  
"By thy clean-shav'd face and unzipp'd fly  
Now wherefore stopp'st thou me?  
He slipp'd on a banana peel  
The Guest can't help but grin  
And listens like a three years' child:  
The tale just right for him.

"The Minnow cheered, the harbour cleared,  
No passengers refus'd,  
The Sun not dark, we did embark  
Upon our three-hour cruise..."

Or, the resurrection of Jesus Christ considered as episodes of *Amos and Andy*:

KINGFISH: Now dat dat Jesus fella be gone, I gonna be moneylendin' in dah temple agin, and ain't nobody gonna knock over mah table.

AMOS: But I be tellin' yah, Kingfish, he done *come back*.

KINGFISH: He done come back... *from dah dead?*

AMOS: Thassa truth, bruddah.

KINGFISH: Lordamercy! Feets don't fail me now!

The open question, of course, is whether Ryman has changed my life *for the better*.

To be perfectly honest, I have another reason to be peeved with Geoff Ryman. Last October, I argued in a speech that science fiction was a naturally conservative genre in matters of narrative style, so it was only to be expected that its writers have

tended to avoid new, experimental forms of writing. Thus, it was embarrassing when a questioner from the audience pointed out that Ryman, a certified science-fiction writer, had done exactly that by writing *253*, his interactive "novel for the Internet." (It really is a shame how so many wonderful arguments are undone simply because of a few facts.)

On a broader level, though, I am troubled by the whole idea of writing, as Ryman suggests, over a million words so that an idle reader at a keyboard might someday request and examine, say, several thousand words. Now, such multiple-choice narratives might be defended as exciting opportunities for *readers*, though I expressed some doubt about that in my speech. (I think most readers want to write their own stories as much as most homeowners want to do their own plumbing.) But producing "interactive fiction" appears almost impossible to defend from the perspective of *writers*.

In the first place, and as seems only natural, when I write for publication, I want people to read *every single word* I've written. Right now, I can't prevent you from throwing away this magazine in disgust or turning to another page, but I'm certainly not going to encourage you to do so. ("IF YOU ARE TIRED OF READING THIS COLUMN, AND WOULD PREFER TO READ AN INTERESTING BOOK REVIEW, PLEASE TURN TO PAGE 54.") Yet an author of interactive fiction is doing exactly that, announcing to readers, "While pressing this button or starting to read this book grants you potential access to many, many words I have written, I will give you a series of choices, so you only have to read a few of them." In effect, she is criticizing her own work, telling members of her audience that they are likely to value only a small fraction of what she has produced. Further, she is making it maddeningly difficult — almost impossible — for even a stubborn and dedicated reader to read everything she has written, since

that will demand repeated journeys through well-travelled prose to reach points where unexplored options remain available. Once I tried to read every possible version of a *Choose Your Own Adventure* book, but finally abandoned the effort; it was so *boring* to return to that same old haunted house again and again, changing one decision every time. As for *253*, I've attempted several times to sample all its pleasures, but I invariably get tired of doing all that pointing and clicking, the laboriousness intensified by the occasional cheery rhetoric conveying to me how much jolly good fun it all is. (Memo to Ryman: it isn't.)

Accompanying the problems of overproduction, implicit self-criticism, and inaccessible prose is that the author of interactive fiction effectively surrenders control of her work to others, and I can't imagine a writer *wanting* to do that. When it comes to writing, I'm a total control freak: I want to control the horizontal of my prose, I want to control the vertical, I want to change its focus to a soft blur or sharpen it to crystal clarity. (And Lord help the typesetter who tampers with my words without my permission or a very good reason! Paul Brazier, are you listening?) [Yes, boss, and I ain't had to change too much so far.] Right now, I'm striving to write in a manner that is sometimes silly without obscuring a serious argument, not always an easy trick to pull off, and I may miss the mark entirely; but I want that to be *my* decision, thank you; I don't want this column preceded by instructions that let *you* determine its tone. ("BEFORE READING THIS COLUMN, PLEASE SELECT A SILLINESS FACTOR OF 1 THROUGH 10. IF YOU CHOOSE 1, THE COLUMN WILL BE ENTIRELY SERIOUS. IF YOU CHOOSE 10, THE COLUMN WILL BE ENTIRELY SILLY.") When Ryman invites me to read his on-line novel, making my own choices as to which character to read about and so on, he in effect makes me his collaborator. But why on Earth would someone

like Ryman want *me* as a collaborator? (Especially after reading the beginning of this column!) And, not to get personal, but why on Earth would he want *you*? I mean, stories like *Was* and "Family" persuasively demonstrate that Ryman writes very capably when he works by himself.

This leads to a final, and central, objection to interactive fiction: it is manifestly the strategy of the totally incompetent, totally stupid writer. An experienced, effective storyteller knows what sort of stories readers will like, knows how to keep the plot moving to hold their interest, knows what characters they will find involving, and knows how much information they will want or need to enjoy the story. Following their instincts, talented storytellers throughout history have done pretty well. But suppose you are an inexperienced, ineffective storyteller, utterly clueless about how to construct an appealing narrative. Well, one approach is time-consuming but certain to succeed: prepare every conceivable option for your readers, and keep asking them what they want.

Instead of following your instincts, you constantly solicit advice: what kind of story would you like? What would you like to happen now? Which character do you want to focus on? Do you want to know about this, or about that? Such a storyteller would in a sense be following an ancient dictum of popular entertainment: always give the public what it wants. But skilful writers should *know* what the public wants without having to keep *asking* them what they want, for heaven's sake; all of this please-choose-A-or-B stuff makes the writer seem like an idiot, like a stand-up comedian who keeps interrupting his routine to ask, "Okay, do you want to hear a joke about women drivers, or about President Clinton? Show of hands, please... Hmm... looks like Clinton in a landslide. Now, do you want to hear the joke with dirty words, or without them?"

And, having identified interactive fiction as the appropriate strategy for a diligent, energetic moron, I naturally return to a subject I have previously discussed, the development of computer intelligence.

That is, there are clear analogies between the way that Deep Blue plays chess and the way that the author of interactive fiction tries to achieve a satisfactory story. As Greg Egan indicated in his letter (*Interzone* 130), the computer's approach is the essence of sheer plodding stupidity: having been informed that its goal is to successfully attack the opponent's king, or achieve a material advantage or promising position most likely to lead to such an attack, Deep Blue examines every single

possible move, considers every possible consequence of each move for several moves in advance, and chooses the move that offers the best chance for a favourable outcome regardless of how the opponent moves. Thus, after first moving its king pawn, the computer planning a second move considers what would happen if it moved the king one space forward, compiles the data showing that all possible consequences of the move are ruinous, and goes on to consider another possible move – wasting computational energies on any number of potential moves that a human chessplayer would instantly reject as senseless. However, if the computer has the capacity and speed to follow this monotonous procedure accurately and quickly, it will almost always hit upon a suitable move.

Now, suppose a more advanced version of Deep Blue was assigned the task of creating a story for a particular reader. While thoroughly informed about all possible narrative elements, it would have no idea

brains, lacking these abilities, must consider every single option before reaching a decision. But that seeming liability may in many cases yield superior results. While humans still beat computers in most thinking competitions, the rapid-fire cybernetic drudgery of Deep Blue can already outshine the chessplaying instincts of Gary Kasparov, and a computer that quickly but carefully considered 50,000 or so possible cases was able to prove the Four-Colour Theorem, something no human topologist could do. In the future, then, a computer may be able to absorb the language and background of William Shakespeare, consider all possible plot developments in *Hamlet*, and generate innumerable different versions of the play – even including, I suppose, the *I Love Lucy* version. ("Hey, Ophelia, I'm home!") But seriously, examining millions of results, many readers may find that they prefer an alternate version – perhaps one in which Hamlet promptly kills Claudius and

ascends to a troubled kingship, like Macbeth. Sure, Shakespeare had darn good instincts as a storyteller, but good instincts may not matter when your competition can consider and develop every possible option. Just ask Kasparov.

And so, at a near-future time when computers are not yet ready to take over the world, they may signal their imminent ascendancy by taking over the task of storytelling, rapidly grinding out every single variation on a story idea and allowing future readers who (unlike certain old fuddy-duddies) enjoy interactivity to Choose Their Own Masterpiece. Storytelling machines have often been predicted in fiction – in Isaac Asimov's "Someday," R. K. Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets*, and elsewhere – and writing a good novel can't be that much more difficult than playing a good game of chess or executing a topological proof. However, in the meantime, just as I would rather see Kasparov beat the computer, I would rather read the works of a human storyteller – and a human storyteller who tells stories like a human, not one perversely endeavouring to imitate an *idiot-savant* machine.

Thus, to conclude what is undoubtedly the last and longest response to Geoff Ryman's request for feedback at the end of "Family," my advice to Ryman is: instead of struggling to devise multitudinous variations on classic stories and situation comedies, why not do something wild and crazy like, say, writing a novel? I'll trust you to make all the best decisions, and I promise to read every word of what you write. Really, now, doesn't that make you feel better?

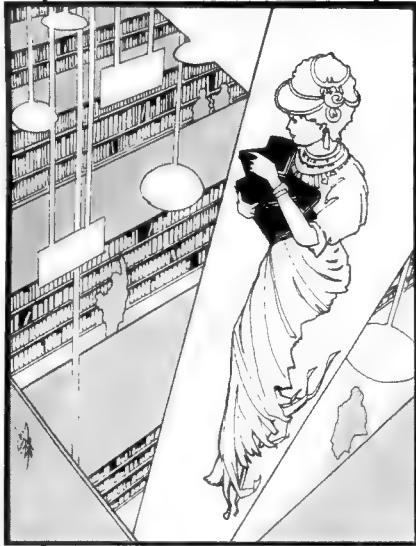
Gary Westfahl

## "Do you want to hear a joke about women drivers, or about President Clinton?"

about how to please that reader. Would A or B be a more appealing protagonist? Should event C occur, or event D? Should the action move to locale E, or locale F? Somewhere in those choices would lie the best possible story, but Deep Blue Two would have no way of knowing which choices to make. So, just as the chess-playing computer constantly examines every single possible move, the storytelling computer would constantly offer its reader every single possible story development; and, just as Deep Blue kept managing to find the best move, Deep Blue Two would keep managing to find the best development for its reader.

Although I'm tempted by Egan's vision of humans and computers harmoniously blending together into unified beings, thus avoiding scenarios of conflict or conquest, the documented failures of slightly different human beings to harmoniously blend together invite scepticism; and it cannot be denied that, at least today, humans and computers think differently, a gap that may always create divisions. Human brains are tremendously good at finding shortcuts, making intuitive leaps, and reaching sound decisions quickly; computer

## BOOKS



## REVIEWED

That the 20th century has been more notable for sanguinary and barbarous folly than any that preceded it, including the 17th, is not, I think, a contentious proposition; though the question of whether imperialism or communism is more to blame will remain open while anyone remains capable of addressing it. Yet it is equally uncontentious that it has been ***The Science Fiction Century***, which is the title of David G. Hartwell's latest anthology (Robinson, £14.99, C-format). Perhaps because of that it has a distinctly violet tinge to it; of the three longest items in its 1,000 pages, H. G. Wells's "A Story of Days to Come" leaves its young lovers stripped of their romantic ideals and well embarked on the course of degeneration which will reach its nadir in the Eloi; the heroine of Charles L. Harness's "The Rose" is killed in the last act; the hero of Roger Zelazny's "He Who Shapes" ends the story in a state of catatonia which looks to be permanent. As for the fourth, Nancy Kress's "Beggars in Spain" goes straight back to John W. Campbell at his most pessimistic: the ruck of humanity, up to and including the Harvard postgraduate schools, is capable of reacting to anything finer than itself only with blind, envy-derived hatred.

Q. When did you last hear sf described as "escapist trash"?

A. Shortly before it lost so much ground to *Sword & Sorcery*.

This is a high-quality selection, the time-travel pieces being particularly interesting, though I can make no sense of the arrangement, which is neither chronological nor thematic. Wolfgang Jesche's "The King and the Dollmaker" is a wonderful find, and put together like the automaton which is its central symbol; Jack

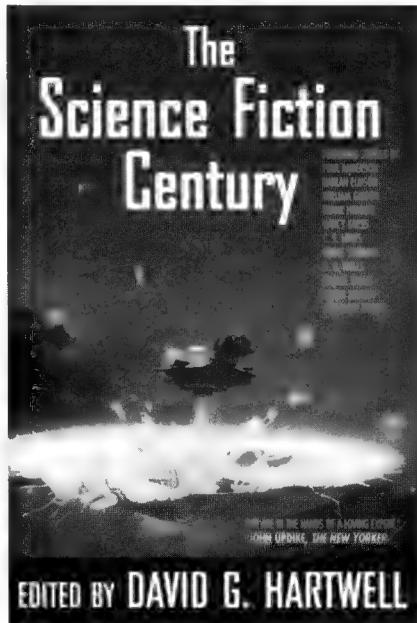
# Science Fiction's Century

Chris Gilmore

Vance's "Rumfuddle" actually controls an infinite array of parallel worlds; and John Crowley's "Great Work of Time" shows how magnificently control of mood can vindicate a story which intentionally undermines its own postulates at every point.

Inevitably I liked some stories better than others, and regret that the book opens and closes with two of the weakest, James Tiptree Jr's sentimental "Beam us Home" and Richard A. Lupoff's foolish "Sail the Tide of Mourning"; but nothing is ill-written except some rather stilted sentences in the translated pieces and Hartwell's introductions, which are full of such yahoo utterances as: "James Morrow (1947-) is one of the leading literary satirists today, who chooses to work in the science fiction and fantasy mode."

Aho! Writing and reading are dif-



ferent matters. Their content is generally informative, though with some self-serving omissions. I can see no excuse for reprinting "He Who Shapes," as Zelazny expressed his own dissatisfaction by rewriting it as *The Dream Master*. Hartwell may disagree with me (and the author), but he should give his reasons. Worse, Kipling's "As Easy as ABC" exists as a story/poem unit, and should never be reprinted without "MacDonough's Song," which is integral to it. Worse still, the never-described statue of a black man being burnt to death by a lynch-mob, which is the story's central symbol, is referred to throughout as "The Nigger in Flames." Hartwell has chosen (or been forced) to bowdlerize that into "The Negro in Flames," which diminishes the power of the phrase and is not what Kipling wrote. Furthermore, he makes no mention of having done so in his intro. All hail the Ministry of Truth!

Many of the writers represented (especially the older generation) held idiosyncratic world-views, and none more so than C. S. Lewis, whose "Ministering Angels" contrives to be extremely pious, extremely funny and (as Hartwell inelegantly notes) "uproariously politically incorrect." At opposite ends of the English social spectrum we have the dystopias of E. M. Forster ("The Machine Stops") and Wells. A dystopia gains its bite from the reflection that many (if not most) of its denizens enjoy its decadence, as both writers were well aware. It happens that Wells, who was highly sexed, working-class and straight, threw off his early repressions but never ceased to regret having wasted his youth on them. Forster was a highly sexed, middle-class pathic whose repressions deepened with time (hence the posthumous publication of *Maurice*). Both men were hopeless at economics, as their dystopias reflect, but Wells foresaw and described in perfect detail both a New Age health farm and the Oxford Romantic Movement, while Forster's bogus Heaven of lecturing and being lectured to by TV, where the sexes come together only for the distasteful chore of procreation, could be tempting only to "the offspring of a long line of maiden aunts."

Hartwell has so far as possible selected stories which are characteristic of their authors and of their own sub-genres within sf; hence, I presume, the presence of Alexander Kuprin's "Liquid Sunshine," a supremely silly tale which proves that in 1913 there were still people capable of being taken in by Swift's joke about extracting sunshine from cucumbers. No doubt the extreme contrivance of the plot-mechanisms, the preposterous emotional relationships and the forest of loose ends are typical of its type as well, but they don't justify its inclusion.



A few stories fail by obvious comparisons: George Turner's "I Still Call Australia Home" is conceptually crude, and suffers badly by proximity to John Wyndham's "Consider Her Ways," which just happens to use an identical plot to incomparably better effect; Chad Oliver's "Blood's a Rover" suffers just as badly if you happen to be familiar with Mack Reynolds's "Ultima Thule"; while the central conceit of Eklund & Benford's "If the Stars Are Gods" is simply unconvincing.

Any editor making a selection of this kind will be caught between the archer and the eagle; if he chooses the very best, critics will find them too familiar; if he doesn't, they'll complain that he hasn't chosen the best. Even his apology for including no Clarke, Heinlein or Campbell is open to the criticism that there's no Aldiss, Leiber or Sheckley either. Myself, considering Algis Budrys, Cordwainer Smith and Roger Zelazny, would have chosen "Wall of Crystal, Eye of Night," "Think Blue, Count Two" and "For a Breath I Tarry" over "Nobody Bothers Gus," "Drunkboat" and "He Who Shapes" — make your own list. Hartwell has made his, and for all my carping, it's a representative list, and very good value. One to buy and keep.

In the beginning (well, in *Space Time & Nathaniel*, Brian Aldiss's first collection) there was a story called "Panel Show," in which the duping and humiliation of one person becomes the evening entertainment of his *soi disant* betters. Since then reality has come up with *Candid Camera* and its variously meretricious successors; sf has added a little cyborg technology to come up with (*inter alia*) D. G. Compton's *Death Watch*, in which the visual field of a complicitous observer becomes the raw material for what may well be the most comprehensive betrayal in fiction. With *Minstrels* (Permeable Press, \$10, B-format), a short book which starts out as a technothriller but rapidly metamorphoses into a fairly simple allegory of the general venality of mankind, Michael Hemmingson adds some filigree to that idea by arranging that instead of the whole world using it to betray a single woman, just about every named character betrays at least one other at one level or more.

The inevitable loss of focus means that this book is really just a fun little item (not a description I'd apply to anything by Compton) in which it is possible to suspend disbelief only with an effort that not everyone will find worthwhile. Hemmingson's moral position is unexceptionable, but correspondingly unoriginal; having read *Minstrels* I found myself no better illuminated, but had been diverted. That said, it's reasonably stylish (except for the author's blind

spot about the difference between "me" and "I") and will doubtless strike a chord with those who know Paris and/or rock'n'pop better than I do. Just the job for a short-haul flight to (say) Paris for a concert.

The consensus view (which I support) is that books are intended to be read. Black Plankton Press, which has published Dan Weiss's *Mood Shifts* and *Diplodinners* (\$10 and \$7, B-format) evidently takes another view; both are set in a hideous sans-serif face and triple bold type throughout, which makes the letters run together until reading becomes a chore. It was evidently too much of a chore for the proofreader — I don't think I've ever come across so many major typos, including many lines duplicated or dropped and at one point a whole page lost.

But to the stories. A Mood Shift is a more-or-less drastic personality makeover, commercially available and much in demand as it's regarded as the route to better-paid work. Fred Duff, the protagonist, finds himself in conflict with the McLunk, the corporation that markets it, partly from pique when his wife converts herself into someone he finds incompatible, but mainly because he is being manipulated by a corporate conspiracy within McLunk. His fellow conspirators, having no intention of telling him more than he needs to know, cautiously tell him a whole lot less.

The development is highly stylized and deftly constructed, with a string of murders and many red herrings, but the editing is on a level with the proofing; the books give a strong impression of having been translated from German with literal fidelity (subject only to an imperfect mastery of grammar) but in total ignorance of the rhythms and idioms of English.

To take a random example:

Fred looked up from an identical McDonald's Bean had provided him with, rubbing his eyes. His eyes were swimming from the fuzzy dossier on Jane Carmichael he had been reading. "Why do you say that?"

Any halfway proficient editor could re-jig that as:

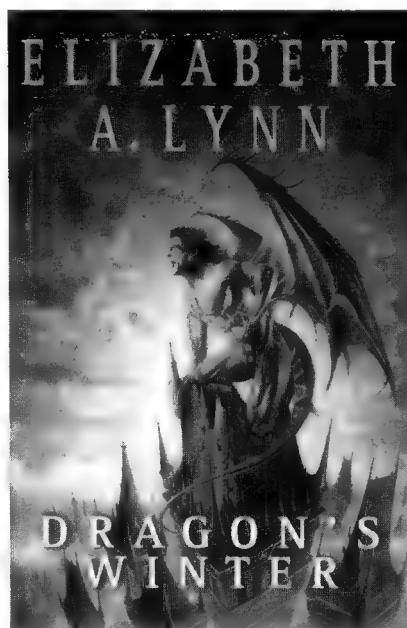
Fred looked up from the identical McDonald's which Bean had provided. He rubbed his eyes, which were swimming from reading the fuzzy dossier on Jane Carmichael. "What do you mean by that?"

The books are like that throughout, which is regrettable, as underneath the mountain of editorial incompetence *Mood Shift* is an agreeable little satire on the American cults of conformity, self-improvement and corporate image. The few jokes to escape the editorial mangling work very well, and remind me strongly of Sheckley circa 1962 (the year of *Journey Beyond Tomorrow*); I suspect that the Dutch originals have much to commend them. *Diplodinners* is a novella set in the same universe but some years later, when the Earth has been accepted into the galactic family but in the lowly role of primary producer of TV sitcoms. The impression of an Icelandic original ill-served by its translator is as strong as ever, but the satire has less bite — TV has been lampooned too often for much chance of originality.

To enjoy the cult success that is his due, Weiss needs only a translator, an editor and a publisher. It's his tragedy if he thinks he already has all three. As they stand, I can only recommend his books to those who have cloth ears or are so fluent in Yiddish that they can mentally translate them into perfect Swedish as they go. Combining business with pleasure, someone might add another star to the Danish literary firmament. Meanwhile, I'm putting in a bid for the English rights.

After that I turned with some relief to Elizabeth A. Lynn's *Dragon's Winter*, which is turned out in Macmillan's sober and reliable livery at £16.99. It belongs to the evil incursion sub-genre of Sword & Sorcery, the current incursion being the work of Tenjiro Atani, sore-headed younger twin of Karadur, Dragon Lord of Ippa.

That term is no mere honorific: Karadur is a were-dragon, with a dragon's short temper, but he strives to keep it under control and rules his small realm justly if a bit heavily at times. He's also homosexual, but as he remains sexually inactive throughout the question of whether gay S&S can be made to work is never addressed. Tenjiro, by contrast, is a self-corrupted sorcerer; what had begun as a reasonable concern that Karadur shouldn't





submerge his rational nature in the irrational glamour of dragonhood and lay waste his own realm has degenerated into a psychotic envy. He wishes to become a dragon himself, less for its own sake than to deny his brother his birthright.

The story is told from a number of viewpoints, mostly those of people who, as happens in S&S, get caught up in the struggle and have no option but to pitch in on the righteous side. Unusually, many of them are women, and even more unusually several are also shape-changers of one sort or

another, though their alternates are such homely beasts as wolves, bears and hawks. Well enough, but the usual disadvantage of shape-shifting is that you're naked when you change back. Lynn's hawk heroine comes back fully clothed and *carrying her gear*, which I regard as cheating.

That aside, it's written to a consistently high standard, with mood and characterization reminiscent of David Gemmell. The opening chapters are short on pace, but there are strong scenes throughout and a very satisfactory climax, marred only slightly

by an over-long anticlimax leading to a secondary climax which is rather obviously there to lead in the sequel, as and when. In general, well done; the only trouble with this sort of thing is that with so much of it about even highly competent work must give place to the truly outstanding. I can therefore recommend this one to the true S&S buff only – and only because I have read others in the genre that I could recommend more highly. The field is that crowded.

Chris Gilmore

**F**orkbeard Fantasy, whose touring production of *The Fall of the House of Usherettes* I reviewed in IZ 116, have taken to the road with their new production, *The Barbers of Surreal*, which will finish its run in Liverpool on June 19th. Like its many predecessors, *The Barbers of Surreal* is a multimedia production in which the company's three actors synchronize their performances – especially their entrances and exits – with video sequences, one of which displays events happening beyond a window and another the far side of a magic mirror. This allows the various characters played by each actor to interact in a marvellously complicated fashion; the wonderful intricacy of the piece is brilliantly contrived by writer Tim Britton and expertly sustained by the performers.

Tim Britton plays Salvador, a barber who has become a qualified genetic engineer in order to bring about a revolution in the art of hair-styling, pioneering the production and development of organic toupees. Salvador has also bought the disused Museum of Childhood next to his salon, within which his brother Flabberjay (played by Britton's brother Chris) has embarked upon a far more adventurous series of experiments and from which Salvador has removed a strangely clouded looking-glass. Although their new ventures in hairdressing are welcomed by such independently-minded clients as Squigglehair and Madame de Range the brothers' other endeavours are of some concern to Salvador's assistant Yacob (Ed Jobling) – who cannot understand why everyone treats him as a child, although he believes himself to be 32. Salvador's dog, Andalou, becomes a nervous wreck after glimpsing something in the looking-glass, and spends the entire play all a-quiver – and who can blame the poor wee thing, when every wig in the salon is apt to start wandering around when no one is paying attention?

Yacob's ominous anxieties reach a new pitch when Salvador acquires a new assistant from the Institute of Anthropomorphism – and even Salvador begins to get a little nervous when he catches glimpses of an old crone in a blue dress, who seems

## Phantasmagoria Revisited

Brian Stableford

intent on reaching the mist-shrouded world beyond the looking-glass. In a climax even more hectic than the awe-inspiring finale of *The Fall of the House of Usherettes*, the fruits of Flabberjay's experiments are revealed – albeit fleetingly – in all their phantasmagorical glory. While the audience sits entranced, like the prisoners in Plato's cave, all manner of variously formulated shadows move across the virtual landscape beyond the bright-lit stage. The effect is hilarious, but there is a depth to the comedy which adds an echo of authentic wonder to every laugh.

The seed from which *The Barbers of Surreal* grew is the notion that genetic engineering offers opportunities for real-izing the surreal – which is to say, bringing into tangible actuality things which have previously belonged to the realm of the imagination. The strong stem from which its lush dramatic foliage is generated is, however, the link between the imagination and the culture of childhood: the particular surrealism of Lewis Carroll's nonsense worlds. The programme notes liken the show's recipe to the list of ingredients in egg shampoo – where the "natural" and the artificial are cleverly compounded for efficacy and showmanship alike – and the comparison is very apt.

The delight which the Forkbeard ensemble take in their endeavours is similar in spirit to that of George Méliès, the theatrical illusionist who became one of the great pioneers of the early cinema. For Méliès, film was a kind of stage magic, a means of manufacturing better and bolder illu-

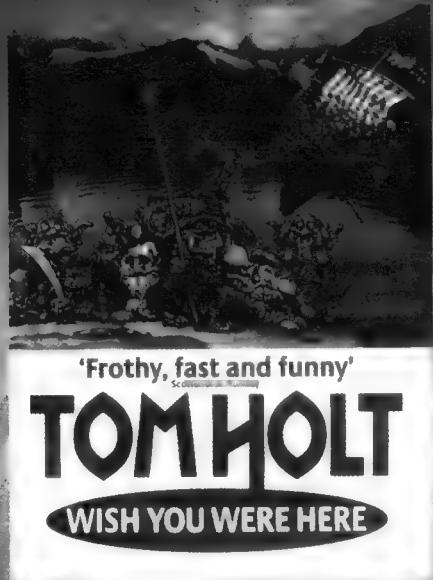
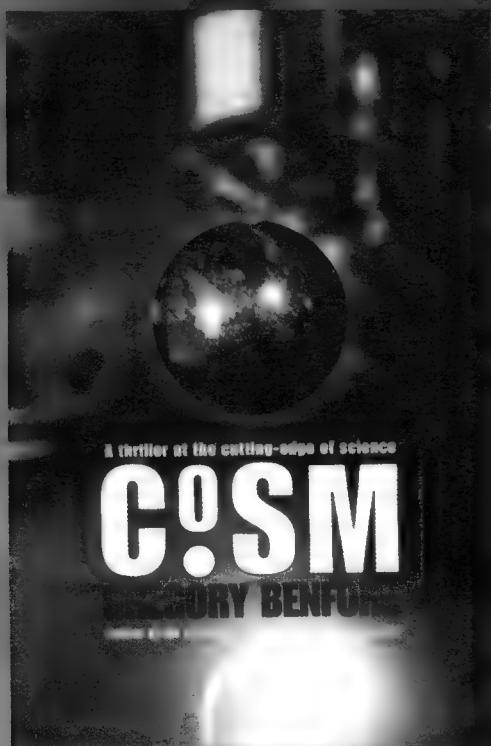
sions; as the quality of filmic illusion increased, however, subsequent movie-makers became far more interested in film as synthetic experience, and mostly employed the tricks of the trade to cultivate the particular illusion that what the audience could see was really happening; cinematic surrealism was largely banished to the realm of animation. By moving their performances back and forth across what they call "the Celluloid Divide" the Brittons and Jobling are restoring a kind of illusionist artistry to the deployment of video – in collaboration with animation and conventional stage magic – which serves to remind us that the history of film has allowed all manner of possibilities and potentialities to decay into disuse and pass almost unheeded.

It is extremely unlikely that 1998 will throw up any other work of absurdist science fiction to compare with *The Barbers of Surreal*, and it is a shame that there is no award within the field for which it could be seriously considered. It is unlikely, too, that there will be many theatrical productions visiting such humble venues as the Merlin Theatre, Frome, and the Bridport Arts Centre which are as extravagantly innovative and inventive as this one. Because of the limitations of visibility associated with such devices as the "mirror," the caged manikin and the peripatetic toupees, the production requires an intimate space, and it would be very difficult to reshape it for a full-sized auditorium, but work of this ingenuity and importance really deserves a far greater audience than its present circumstances permit.

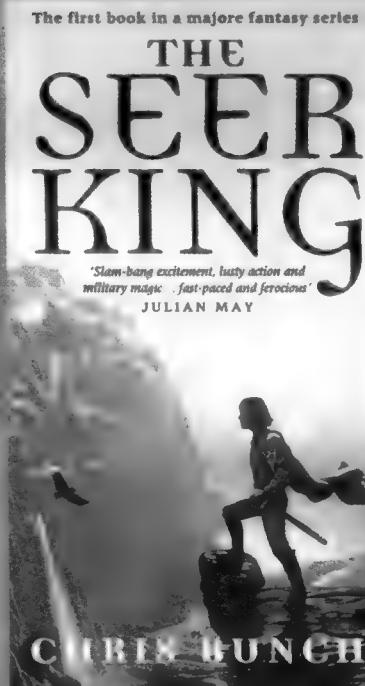
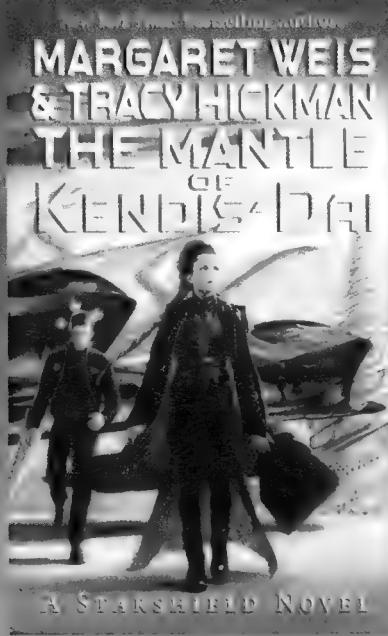
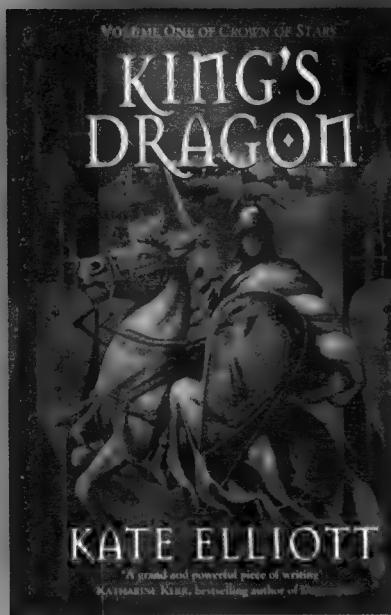
In addition to touring with *The Barbers of Surreal* Forkbeard will be mounting an exhibition of "animated paraphernalia" at Cheltenham Art Galley from July to September and will be running workshops in connection with the Cheltenham Music Festival. It is worth making every effort to see any and all of their productions if you can; they are among the most artistically significant endeavours in contemporary fantasy and the time will surely come when it will be reckoned a considerable privilege to have seen them in their original form.

Brian Stableford

# TO know is nothing at all



# TO imagine is everything



ORBIT

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**B**ig words are often spoken prior to the launch of a new independent-press magazine. We know only too well about magazines whose ambitions immediately outweigh the acumen and dedication of their publishers; also familiar are the proposed magazines fronted by frustrated, unpublished writers which are about to revolutionize the publishing industry by printing *proper* stories; and then there is the trumpeted monthly or bimonthly schedule, which in reality often turns out to mean "sporadic" or even "when we feel like it." It doesn't inspire confidence, but there are still quite a few magazines to which you should have no qualms about subscribing.

It's relatively early days yet for *Nasty Piece of Work*, and there's a lot of hard work ahead for David Green if he's going to stick to his bimonthly schedule, let alone find enough stories of suitable quality, but it has apparently sailed quite effortlessly through its first year of production. No great fanfare accompanied the launch of this magazine, just the identification of a possible niche in the market, a commitment to relatively high production values – glossy paper, laminated cover, trimmed pages, crisp type – and a measured approach that sees continued refinements to the layout and a gradual increase in page count. Mind you, David Green might have a secret I don't know about, like a lottery win, because all this (#6 is 86 A5 pages thick) will only cost you £1.50 or £5.50 for four (not six, surprisingly) from 20 Drum Mead, Petersfield, Hants GU32 3AQ.

Quite a lot is packed into these 86 pages, although some of it is pretty brief and/or inconsequential; some of it is poetry too, which ranges from the bad (Michael Pendragon's stupid "The Bang! Bang! Poem" is more or less entirely onomatopoeic while the author shoots his family and pets), to the brilliant (Clare Gunther's schoolgirl ponders a more sinister use for the hippo's mouth in "Feeding Time at the Zoo"), via the sublime absurdity and clever wordplay of Rhys Hughes's "Spaghetti Pussy." The fiction covers a similar range. Despite an overblown opening couple of paragraphs Paul Pinn and Alexander Johnson's "The Flayer" settles into a skilful and, especially in the context of a magazine whose main aim is to gross you out, subtle depiction of South American betrayal and hypocrisy, the lifting of a mestizo half-breed's skin beautifully described as the flayer creates a new work of art.

In contrast, the prose in Paul Lockey's "Killing Time" is almost reticent despite its equally exotic location, an approach which would be quite successful if only the actual story didn't disappoint so much: seems we've been brought here merely to witness a

depraved wrestling bout, and nothing has any real bearing on anything else, save for a somewhat clunking observation about civilization. Further contrast is supplied by Jane Fell and P. C. Attaway. Fell's story is a stream-of-consciousness effort vaguely reminiscent of the turbocharged classic "Levelheading" (a different author) from *Strange Attractor* a few years ago, but this is a stalling 2CV of a story, half-stuck in the mundane, the language (pee, loo) far too coy to make the necessary impact. Attaway's "12 Days of Christmas," though, is a perfect example of how successful a lack of traditional plot and structure can be: a series of convincing newspaper reports giving details of growing disharmony and mindless violence is unsettling in a way a more conventional narrative might not be able to match.

There are more good stories from the likes of Paul Finch, D. F. Lewis and Rhys Hughes, and also a few more turkeys (boring retreads of horror stories based around schoolboy bullying, for example), but I expected this kind of hit-miss ratio with so much content, and lord knows tastes differ.

Also trundling along nicely is *Albedo One*. Some lively comment here, in particular Severian's on-going bashing of professional publishing houses. In issue 15 (A4, 44pp, £2.50 or £10/4 from 2 Post Road, Lusk, Co. Dublin, Ireland) Severian

has been severely influenced by the apparent success of the "small press stream" at Eurocon, marvelling at some new-found opportunities small-press publishing presents. I sighed with relief upon reading phrases like "maybe we can be real publishers, just smaller. Maybe we don't have to be self-deprecating any more." I've been banging on about this for three years now. I'd go further than Severian and abolish, if I could, the term "small press" completely, because it gives off exactly the sort of defeatist connotations *real* publishers need to avoid. It is increasingly irrelevant anyway, given the appearance and content of some of our classier magazines. By the same token I'd question the validity of a having a "small press stream" at conventions: good for morale, obviously, but beyond that? The independent press is isolated enough as it is, without deliberately hiving itself off from the mainstream even further.

So anyway, editorially *Albedo One* is looking forward, although its cover art and typography, particularly the font chosen for titles, is rather old-fashioned. There is also some careless proof-reading, most noticeable in the opening story, Jeff VanderMeer's "The General Who is Dead," which seems to have been scanned and not checked, leaving us with errors such as "wan nth" for "warmth" and "tum- ing" for "turning." The story itself, though, is excellent. During the Korean War the 52nd Battalion "defend a city of the dead from the dead without," 40,000 Chinese soldiers frozen to death along a snowy plain, waiting for the spring "thaw that would make them fully human again." Hauntingly beautiful, and not sf at all. Also with a war background is "The Undertaker's Dilemma," a strange little story by Tiernan Ivory in which two fallen soldiers apparently share the exact same identity. One corpse is claimed by the soldier's wife; the other corpse remains in the mortuary a short while longer, until that too is claimed – by another wife who apparently shares the exact same identity. Curious, but that's all, so the story doesn't satisfy. Neither does the fact that the story is presented with dialogue but no quotation marks.

Norman Spinrad's "The Fat Vampire" is a lame and tedious foody whereas Ceri Jordan's "The Misrule," perhaps the most science-fictional story in this issue, is a sharp political allegory set aboard the multi-generational spaceship *Universal Pilgrim*, whose long voyage is just about to come to an end. Other stories from Alan Casey and Nigel Quinlan (the only one to be set in Ireland), plus a long and detailed interview with Terry Brooks round off a sound but unremarkable issue, in which the non-sf Jeff VanderMeer story

## Magazine Reviews

Andy Cox

remains, for me, the highlight.

The latest magazine to take advantage of *Zene's* printing scheme (it has arranged for discounted rates on various forms of printing – the more who use it, the cheaper the printing becomes) is *Night Dreams*, whose eighth issue actually has a spine (A4, 44pp, £2.80 or £10.50/4 from Kirk King, 47 Stephens Road, Walmley, Sutton Coldfield, West Midlands B76 2TS). The masthead and layout have yet to catch up: the former is a bit of a doodle, the latter is a bit of a rush. The content is similarly unspectacular, but typically solid and entertaining.

Each issue of this magazine has a featured writer. This time it's Mark Chadbourn, and his "Vaudeville" is, unsurprisingly, easily the most accomplished here, contrived and basically familiar though it is. It tells the story of three men's reunion in a music hall, where they hope to somehow put right the damage caused there ten years earlier when some supernatural messing went horribly wrong. It came as no surprise to me when, in the interview which follows the story, Chadbourn reveals Stephen King to be his

favourite author and *It* his favourite book. "Vaudeville" is very much of that school; this telling of the story via recollection and info-dumping dialogue is very undemanding of the reader, but it is also very convenient for the author. In this instance I think Chadbourn is at his best when writing about his characters, as in describing Tranquillity Doyle's comedic talent, or lack of it, and the bond that forms between the men. The horror seems almost superfluous at times like these, and remains at its most effective when glimpsed in the shadows or in the wings.

P. C. Attaway is again on good form despite phrases like "bulbous eyes bulging" which had me involuntarily reaching for the red pen. In "Death's a Beach" he sets out the relationship between Mark, his girlfriend Wendy and her retarded son Sam with some snappy dialogue during a car journey to the seaside. Once there, Wendy goes into town to shop, leaving Mark and Sam alone on the beach. Mark reluctantly allows himself to be buried up to the neck, and Sam leaves him there, trapped, as the tide comes in... Incredibly, Mark survives

drowning, only to be confronted by an even more backward local boy ("Er – hullo – Mister Head"), whose help he tries to enlist to dig him out. The boy has an awesome knife in his canvas bag. The perfect tool, thinks Mark. Presently, Wendy returns, finds Sam wandering about the car park. He leads her excitedly to where he'd buried Mark. All she can see is Mark's head, as Sam runs up behind it, rather like, she thinks, a goalkeeper running up to kick a ball... A great ending to an easy, funny read.

Elsewhere, Derek M. Fox and William Meikle are conspicuous for being competent but predictable, and Simon Williams's "Ivy," despite some promise, suffers from cliché ("poison Ivy"), an unconvincing setting (halfway through it turns out to be medieval but you'd never have known) and bad construction (too much toing and froing): obvious faults that would be rectified by reading more. Overall, as with all the magazines this time, some jewels set against the leather.

Andy Cox

The ghost story depends on a death early on, or before the story begins: the equivalent of the spy who must be talked into one last mission. There is no plot until this business has been shoved away, and the plot involves the characters responding to the death or to the apparition. The stories in *Gothic Ghosts*, edited by Wendy Webb and Charles Grant (Tor, \$23.95), are intended to be *character-driven*, according to the string of soundbites that constitutes an Introduction: "It was out of the nineteenth century that the short story as it is known today emerged. The focus of those works was primarily the 'what' of the story – the circumstances or event in which the characters were immersed. Now we are more interested in exploring characters through motivation and conflict. We want to know them, sympathize with them, and connect in some way their situation to experiences of our own." It seems strange, then, that the editors have picked *some* stories in which the ghost element is far more convincing than the human.

Tiptoe through the typos, however, and you will find some excellent work. Brian Stableford in "Seers" offers an explanation of what a ghost really is. "A Mirror for Eyes of Winter" by Jessica Amanda Salmonson has a dog that is sensitive to the presence of its dead master saving its mistress's life in the snow. Stuart Palmer's "Cinder Child" sees a boy arriving on his uncle's estate and becoming aware of some children in the fireplace. (This also offers an enjoyable explanation of spontaneous

## Death Before Breakfast

David Mathew

combustion!) "The Place of Memories" by Thomas S. Roche includes a juxtaposition of the supernatural and sex, which is handled well; this is also a story that involves a jealous house, and makes the reader wonder how many other stories there are in which a character must defend himself against a bed. This story also makes the reader wonder if in fact the most interesting stories in *Gothic Ghosts* are the ones that flatly gainsay the editors' intentions. "Worst Fears" by Rick Hautala is a well-written idea of a woman dining with her husband and recognizing, one by

one, the other diners; they are people who have died during her life.

Reading other stories here – the wispy "Nuestra Senora" by Carrie Richerson; the mystifyingly bad "In the Clearing" by Brad Strickland, which fearlessly has one woman say to another, "You needn't try to seduce me, dear. My tastes never ran in that direction, and my juices have long since dried" – I felt like the time-lapsed man. I kept expecting a later result from some of the weaker pieces, but nothing arrived...

And as for the *appearance* of the book! Did any thought go into the design? Ignoring the uninspired title, this reviewer spent some time trying to convince himself that what the cover was showing was a skin cell, or a hair follicle, under the gaze of a powerful microscope. But no: the picture really is a close-up of two trees in the mist and moonlight, badly done.

At first it seems that Kate Wilhelm's *The Good Children* (St Martin's Press, \$22.95) will also offer a shock of the unoriginal. An off-the-peg family moves into a new house and the youngest child suspects that it's haunted. The father dies early in an industrial accident, and after a decline in the family's lifestyle, the mother dies too in what might or might not have been an accident. This is where matters get interesting. The children make a decision to hide their mother's death from the world to avoid being taken into care. They have no financial worries and have been self-sufficient for a long time. The oldest boy can drive and the old-



BOOKS  
REVIEWED



est girl, Amy, can do a vocal impersonation of the mother and even looks like her, at a push. When nosy neighbours visit, Amy calls out from the bedroom that salespeople are not welcome. Having had a reputation for reclusiveness, the mother's unwillingness to face the world is hardly called into question.

Nor is much else. Income tax returns are forged; the oldest boy graduates from high school ... and we slide through Wilhelm's slick prose, watching as the children grow up. Two and a half years pass, and now matters become tense: "I realized that night that I was afraid of my brother and sister ... I had just turned fourteen, and Brian was only nine, and the two of us had become a burden..." What's more, Brian believes that mother is wafting spectrally, keeping the family safe from the ghosts that were present before.

Realizing they won't be able to push their luck forever, the children decide to let the world know their mother has died. Confessing that they buried her in the garden might be a mistake, so they concoct an elaborate disappearance. In this fabrication, she makes a long-distance journey to a cousin whom none of the children have met ... and does not return. The kids' story is that she has made several such trips before, and always phoned to say she arrived safely. This time, knowing that the police will check the phone records, they call a number they pretend mother gave them, apologize for the incorrect connection, and eventually inform the authorities.

But the fabric is fraying. Two go off to college, leaving our narrator, Liz, and the younger brother, who by this point is composing works on his violin for his dead mother. A well-meaning housekeeper is appointed, as is a young lawyer/guardian who has the hots for the oldest daughter, and with whom Liz falls in love on a camping trip. Brian is taken to a psychiatric hospital because of his hallucinations and suspected suicidal streak. And the ghosts? Sometimes, as Wilhelm proves, there are worse presences in a family than mere ghosts...

Kate Wilhelm has created a dysfunctional family of a very unusual sort. Acne, breaking voices and menstrual cramps are as nothing to the other problems that these children go through; indeed, such adolescent calamities are clipped to bare necessities, the better to examine the dehumanized plotting-machines that the children have become. Comparisons could be made to other work – to *Lord of the Flies* or *The Outsiders* – but *The Good Children* contains no wasted words, is crystal clear, and is very good company indeed.

Despite its dreadful title, *Man on a Murder Cycle* (Hodder &

Stoughton, £16.99) is not the latest fantasy pun-athon from the likes of Piers Anthony or Robert Aspirin. It is the second novel from a young British writer of horror fiction: Mark Pepper. The story is simple. A burned-out writer hopes to repeat the runaway success of a novel he wrote eight years ago, even though the work in the interim has been garbage. His agent also wants him to have another hit. Meanwhile, another writer sends the same agent an excellent manuscript: the sort that reviewers once felt the need to call "a rollercoaster of a novel." Then the good writer dies in a motorcycle accident. The burned-out writer and the agent fake ownership of the work, but only after the writer has been to the *real* writer's house to steal spare copies of the manuscript and computer discs. So popular with the public is the stolen book that the has-been writer is encouraged to produce a sequel; the money is rolling in, there are signings...

But strange matters are afoot. The dead writer manages to wriggle away from the mortuary slab, and then kills an undertaker. At a signing, a leather-clad biker makes a nuisance of himself, and wherever he appears there is violence. Has the dead writer come back to life? Not exactly, as his sister carefully explains for those who have yet to join the dots: "The spirit of my dead brother is acting out the violent scenes from his novel in the physical guise of his fictional creation, Milton the Biker." The sister has recognized this psychopathic smartarse's handwriting, and he has called her a name that only her brother knew. The biker's sustenance comes from following the plots that are written for him. A hand grenade explodes in a bank; skinheads are messily de-goolied with a Stanley knife. Should the sequel be published if more innocent people will die?

*Man on a Murder Cycle* is a fast read, occasionally a little overwritten, but entertaining to the last. There are a few dud elements: as in the Wilhelm there are rather too many coincidences to help the plot along; there's an unconvincing, foul-mouthed copper, and an flaccid sex scene. But on the whole, an assured offering: a peal of heavy-metal thunder!

As early as page two of Julian May's *Perseus Spur: The Rampart Worlds, Book 1* (HarperCollins, £16.99) comes the following half a paragraph: "The albino borogroves drooped wanly and didn't sing a note. With the divers getting glummer and glummer, I tried to demonstrate the firecracker defensive behaviour of the brillig spongids at considerable risk to my own neck. Kofi coaxed a very pissed-off bandersnatch dodecapod partly out of its shell by offering himself as bait." The novel is over 300

pages long, and a fun but challenging read: somewhere between Lewis Carroll, Phil Dick and the hardboiled crime narratives of James M. Cain. It's the only book of this bunch that does not have an early death as a necessary plot springboard; the leap-off point here is the moment when an ex-con tour-guide discovers that his house has been eaten by a sea toad.

Don't laugh. The hero, Helly, has to discover why the toad was sent. Was his father the expected recipient? He goes into hyperspace (colourfully done) in order to hijack a vessel that is carrying his enemy. But swiftly Helly realizes that problems are like germs: they must be killed off completely, or they reproduce. He is "marooned ... on the backside of (a) comet" and becomes immersed in a galactic conspiracy that reads like Oval Office chicanery, crossed with a plot about genetic engineering. The Haluk (nasty aliens) have teamed up with the Gala (who control many planets) and Helly suggests to his comrades that the Haluk are trying to buy the Perseus Spur. Helly's sister has been captured, and later so is he; their DNA will be used for experimental cocktails. (It never rains but it pours for this unfortunate sod, although on the scale of things, being forced to eat synthocheese might not be so bad after all.) Helly gives everything away to his captors in an interrogation, and the reader wonders how he'll ever come through.

A few concerns apply. Having the skill to make the reader believe in a far-fetched situation, Julian May on occasion lets it crash down by including a misplaced sentence. For example, when Helly is discussing the Haluk he makes a stupid interruption ("Sounds like they'd adore Arizona") that informs the reader of what May knows about that part of America, but does little for the plot. One particular ship moves at a speed that is "impossible." And then there are the occasional lines of weary resignation that made me laugh out loud, such as: "She sighed. 'I suppose they'll kill us now as well.'"

Which is nit-picking somewhat. *Perseus Spur* is a very good read. One interesting fact about it is the oddly-reasoned distancing effect of having some characters with names that are usually associated with the opposite sex. For example, "Matt" is a woman with a man's name; and the only people I have ever known to have shortened their names to Helly have been women (although in fairness in the book it is short for Helmut). It's an effective technique that led this reviewer to wonder how different the plot might have been if the characters had all been of the opposite gender.

David Mathew



REVIEWED

Midnight. A bleak, rain-swept heath, with thunder punctuating the howling of the wind. A flash of lightning briefly illuminates two dark figures, both cloaked and hooded, one hurrying across the heath clutching a strange object in both hands, the second bent over a cauldron.

A: Neil, well met. The Thane of Interzone sends his greetings.

B: Evening, Neil. What's that in your hand?

A: 'Tis the latest *New Worlds* anthology, from the editor's room untimely ripped. The Thane wants it reviewed asap.

B: *New Worlds* – I remember that name. Some sharp stories. Edited by that sword-'n'-sorcery geezer, Moorcock?

A: No, wrong time-frame. This is the new incarnation, edited by David Garnett. And this one is the fifth in the revived series.

B: The fifth? So how come it doesn't have a "5" anywhere on it?

A: Thereby hangs a tale. As you can see, it's published by White Wolf and it's priced in dollars.

B: Yes, 12.99 of them, whatever that comes to in real money.

A: Well, the wisdom of the British publishing druids is: "Short-story collections don't sell."

B: But *New Worlds* is different; it's got street cred. And wait a minute, it's all coming back to me – Garnett's first four were excellent anthologies; good reads and classy with it. Blimey, even we gave them halfway positive reviews!

A: Maybe. But Garnett still had to scour the planet looking for a new publisher before he finally turned up White Wolf.

B: So he found a US publisher to back his great British institution, while the Brits steered clear. That's downright embarrassing! Mind you, that still doesn't explain the missing "5."

A: Oh, I don't bloody know what happened to it! Maybe White Wolf wanted to start with a clean slate in the US. Or perhaps it just fell off over the Atlantic. Now, are you going to read it first or shall I?

B: Read it? Come off it, Neil. What do you think I've got the cauldron on for? I've put some nice fresh entrails in, too. So chuck the book in and let them get reviewing.

A: All right then, here goes.

B: Hmm. First impressions appear reasonably positive. Whoops! That lead story, "The Emperor's New Reality" by Pat Cadigan, put the innards right off. It's a take on the familiar tale of similar name, updating the moral for the VR age. It starts off "Once upon a time..." and goes tediously on for far too long. Why wasn't it tucked away towards the end of the book rather than put in pole position?

## Divined Judgment

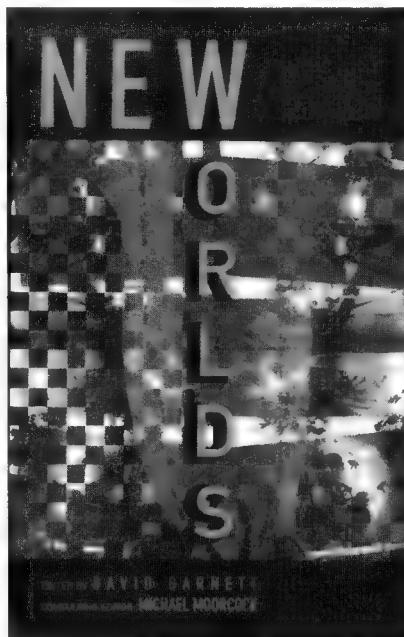
Neil Jones &

Neil McIntosh

A: Gods know. Anyway, there are some names there the Thane's loyal readers will be familiar with: Eric Brown, Garry Kilworth, Peter F. Hamilton, Graham Joyce and Ian Watson. The entrails seem reasonably positive about them. They say Watson's "A Day Without Dad," about a woman who carries her ailing parent as a consciousness inside her, is effective; Brown's downbeat "Ferryman," showing a world where implants allow people to come back from the dead is thoughtful and well-rounded; the techno-anarchist storyline of Hamilton and Joyce's "White Stuff" is fast-paced and slick; and Kilworth's "Attack of the Charlie Chaplins" is one wild alien-invasion story.

B: But there are other names here the innards have never heard of. According to them, Christine Manly's "For Life" is a piece of gender politics set in a world where men are pets; it's a smooth read even if it does stretch credibility too far. And Noel K. Hannan's "A Night on the Town" is a taut little thriller set in a well-sketched Nuevo Caracas. The sense of a tightening nightmare is excellent if undermined slightly by a we-couldn't-care-if-he-croaks main character.

A: They reckon Graham Charnock's "A Night on Bare Moun-



tain" possesses both power and effect but think the writing is dauntingly impenetrable.

B: Yes, the innards always did prefer straightforward storytelling, but at least they more or less like it. They dismiss Andrew Stephenson's "The Pact" as just plain dull.

A: Ah. "Thirteen Views of a Cardboard City" by William Gibson. The entrails usually rate him.

B: Not this time. They've taken one word out of the title to sum it up. It begins with C and it's not City. They're not keen on this next one either. "Death, Shit, Love, Transfiguration" by Brian Aldiss. Guess which word they've pulled out of that title!

A: But where's the really good stuff got to? Give them another stir!

B: Ah yes, here we are: three standout stories. First, there's Kim Newman's "Great Western." That punning title neatly sums it up – a cowboy movie played out in a rural English setting where feudalism meets the stirrings of industrialism in an alternate 20th century.

A: Yes, with anyone else at the helm it wouldn't work, but Newman's got the sheer storytelling ability to bring it off. And then there's "Heart of Whiteness" by Howard Waldrop –

B: – an off-the-wall mix of clandestine Elizabethan plotting, magic, and a meeting between Christopher Marlowe and Doctor Faustus. It puts the innards in mind of that other excellent crypto-historical they liked in that otherwise dreary Dozois best-of collection.

A: The one by Gregory Feeley. Hmm. The entrails declare the third standout to be the editor's own story. Isn't that illegal, unethical, disreputable or vaguely dodgy or something?

B: It might be if it was by David Garnett. But the innards report it's actually by the old editor of *New Worlds*, Michael Moorcock. They say it's mildly grisly, about flogging off old bones, and called "London Bone." It builds a convincing canvas of the great metropolis as well as proving a very satisfying read.

A: Hello, here comes the entrails' final verdict.

B: Yes, they say: (i) bravo for David Garnett, first for turning out yet another solid anthology and second for persistence above and beyond the call of duty in finding a publisher; (ii) good-on-you to White Wolf for being that publisher and keeping the *New Worlds* name alive, and (iii) go-out-and-buy-it (or ask your familiar to broomstick a copy from the US) to all the Thane's faithful readers.

A: That's it, then, another review done. Now, when shall we two meet again?

B: Well that's down to the Thane. But next time ask him to leave out the thunder, the lightning and especially this sodding rain, will you?

Neil Jones & Neil McIntosh



**H**ere is the *St James Guide to Horror, Ghost & Gothic Writers* edited by David Pringle (St James Press, no price shown – believed to be \$105 in the USA, or about £75 in the UK).

There's an easy formula for reviewing door-stopping reference books: mandatory praise for the editor ambitious or foolhardy enough to devote a significant chunk of his or her life to the sisyphean task (in this case, David Pringle of this parish); a gentle whinge about who has been included and excluded (here we have Colin Wilson but not Simon Raven, Susan Kay but not Valerie Martin, Charles Dickens but not Wilkie Collins, Gogol but not Dostoevsky, Henry James but not Joseph Conrad); some carping about bibliographic information (the listings of film adaptations are so sketchy I'd question the point of even making the effort to include them); comparison with all the other doorstops on the market (in this case interestingly irrelevant, in that there are several science-fiction, fantasy or mystery encyclopedias but no real competitors in horror); and a final niggle about the reviewer's own entry (my place of birth is London, not as stated here). However, the formula really isn't much use, especially since a book like this is a considerable investment and really needs to be engaged with by its reviewers to put across its importance to the people who will need to own it.

It is highly significant that St James have only come to producing this volume after tackling *Romance and Historical Writers*, *Crime and Mystery Writers*, *Science-Fiction Writers*, *Western Writers* and *Fantasy Writers*. It's almost reassuring to know that horror (which, for convenience, is the term I'll use to stand for Pringle's Horror, Ghost & Gothic) is still the genre most likely to be despised and least likely to be taken seriously, and certainly least likely to be spoken about by truly informed commentators. In the entry on Phil Rickman, contributor David Mathew notes that his books have earned praise from the likes of Joanna Trollope and Ruth Rendell, both of whom feel obliged to temper their praise with qualifications like "I don't like horror novels." Mathew says: "not only do two writers famous in their own fields sweep together the entire output from the horror genre and then trash it, but both of them go on to say how Rickman transcended their expectations. It might be construed, then, that Rickman was seen by them as something other than horror: something under the auspices of horror, but classier, more palatable." Of course, the informed will recognize that Rickman's precise strength as a writer is that he writes from the dead-centre of his genre and happens to do it well; as opposed to

# An Horrific Doorstop

Kim Newman

being one of those figures (Franz Kafka, Isaac Bashevis Singer and John Updike have entries here) who might include horror in their output but are fundamentally not genre writers. Come to think of it, there is (as yet) no *St James Guide to Serious, Literary & Proper Writers*.

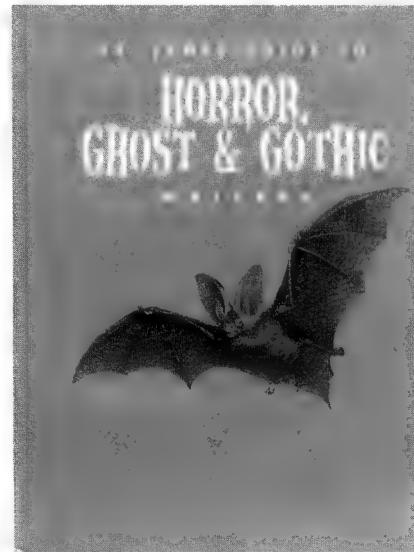
Elsewhere on the shelves, there are a great many reference books about horror in film (I've edited one myself, *The BFI Companion to Horror* – which has some literary coverage), efforts like the Clute and Grant *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (which is malformed slightly by its discomfort with horror), and an honourable but only partially successful attempt to cover horror in all media (Jack Sullivan's *The Penguin Encyclopedia of Horror and the Supernatural*), but this book is the first serious attempt to anatomize its complex and variegated field. As the title suggests, horror, ghost and gothic fiction are three strands which intertwine and are themselves composed of multiple sub-genres; given the concurrent decline in genre horror and rise of a specific sub-genre in the last few years, the book might almost have gone so far as to entitle itself a Guide to Horror, Ghost, Gothic & Vampire Writers. There are tentpole figures like M. G. Lewis, Edgar Allan Poe,

Bram Stoker, M. R. James, Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, H. P. Lovecraft, Shirley Jackson, Stephen King and Peter Straub – each of whom has a swathe of followers – and there are those who find themselves included almost for reasons of temperament or circumstance (Iain Banks, Iain Sinclair, Mikhail Bulgakov) rather than a commitment to writing from within an established or developing tradition.

It might well be that the delay in the production of this volume is as much down to the difficulty of deciding who and what should go into it as it is a barely suppressed general distaste for the subject. Pringle admits some (Angela Carter, Karl Edward Wagner, Oscar Wilde) have been excluded because they were covered in his *Fantasy Writers* volume, and a great many others have featured in the Crime and Science-Fiction volumes – Joe Lansdale is even in the Western book – so there is a sense of floor-sweeping here, whereby the writers of 1970s paperback nasties, the genteelly chilled followers of M. R. James and some literary heavyweights (let's see other genres match Kafka, James and Dickens!) are made to co-exist rather more uncomfortably than the karasses lumped together in the earlier St James Guides. However, this suggests why horror might be a more exciting, unpredictable, dangerous and useful field than many others, and why a book like this is literally essential.

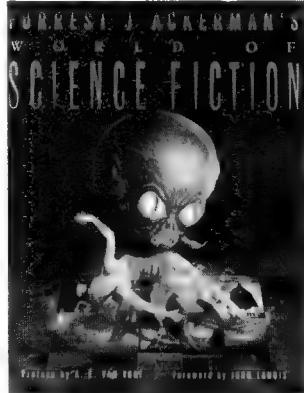
It goes almost without saying that contributors like S. T. Joshi, Stefan Dziemianowicz, Mike Ashley, Brian Stableford, Paul Di Filippo, Joel Lane, Gary Westfahl and others mostly manage to nail exactly the strengths of their subjects in pithy, readable entries. If there's an overall flaw it may be that the despicability of the field prompts a little too much special pleading: an effort has been made to find contributors who like their subjects – of course, it would be hard to find someone qualified to write about production machines like Christopher Pike or J. N. Williamson who hadn't already read a great deal of their output and must therefore have some sympathy with it – and therefore quite a few shoddy writers seem to get off lightly, with even the lowliest paperback or pulp hack praised for just having shown up. It is appropriate that no contributor takes a high moral tone about subject matter intended to be extreme or decadent, but very few points are scored against the truly unforgivable atrocities of gutter-level horror, sheer bad writing or the formulaic recycling of already worn-out plots and themes. As one of those freaks who actually reads reference books cover to cover for pleasure, I can report that this is a delight to pore through.

Kim Newman



The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

**Ackerman, Forrest J. *Forrest J Ackerman's World of Science Fiction*.** Foreword by John Landis. Preface by A. E. van Vogt. Aurum Press, ISBN 1-85410-573-6, 240pp, hardcover, £20. (Copiously illustrated, large-format survey of the sf field, with heavy emphasis on films and TV; first published in the USA, 1997; yet another coffee-table book about sf, it contains some pretty pictures and it's written by a veteran fan, but unfortunately the text is not very good; David A. Kyle's *Pictorial History of Science Fiction* did it all just as well [or just as badly] more than 20 years ago.) 19th March 1998.



**Ash, Sarah. *The Lost Child*.** Orion/Millennium, ISBN 0-85798-424-2, 344pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; see the interview with the author which appeared in *Interzone* 129.) 16th March 1998.

**Barnes, Steven. *Iron Shadows*.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85708-X, 383pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Crime/horror [?] novel, first edition; it involves a sinister cult in Los Angeles.) February 1998.

**Barnett, Paul. *Strider's Universe: Book Two of the Strider Chronicles*.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-601-7, 436pp, A-format paperback, cover by Roger Harris, £5.99. (Sf novel,

first edition; second in this lightweight but adventuresome space-opera series which began with *Strider's Galaxy* [1997].) 5th March 1998.

**Bibby, James. *Ronan's Revenge: Painfully Translated from the Original Gibberish*.** Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-526-5, 245pp, hardcover, cover by Paul Davies, £16.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; the author's third volume of Pratchett-lookalike stuff, it says "copyright 1997" inside, but we think that must be an error.) 16th March 1998.

**Brin, David. *Heaven's Reach: The Final Book of the Uplift Trilogy*.** Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-10174-9, xi+448pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received.) 9th June 1998.

**Brin, David. *The Postman*.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-629-7, 323pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1985; this is the third Orbit printing and the movie tie-in edition, with a cover featuring Kevin Costner.) 19th February 1998.

**Bujold, Lois McMaster. *Memory*.** Earthlight, ISBN 0-671-01607-5, 462pp, A-format paperback, cover by Gary Ruddell, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1996; another Miles Vorkosigan space adventure, and the first to be published in Britain for quite some time – multi-Hugo Award-winner Bujold has been ill-served by UK publishers to date, but perhaps things will now improve for her: this is the first sf title to be released under Simon & Schuster's new "Earthlight" imprint, edited by John Jarrold.) April 1998.

**Bunch, Chris. *The Demon King*.** "The fantasy epic of empire, power and magic continues." Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-571-1, 507pp, C-format paperback, cover by Keith Scaife, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 1998; second in a trilogy which began with *The Seer King* but which seems to be lacking an overall title.) 19th March 1998.

**Calder, Richard. *Cythera*.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-533-9, 311pp, A-format paperback,

£5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; Calder's fourth novel, this is an expansion of his *Interzone* story "The Embarkation for Cythera" [issue 106]; last month we listed the American, St Martin's Press, edition as the first, but apparently this UK paperback original precedes.) 5th March 1998.

**Carroll, Jerry Jay. *Top Dog*.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00513-6, 330pp, A-format paperback, cover by Joseph Daniel Fiedler, \$5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996; a debut novel by a new American writer, in which a wheeler-dealer businessman is transformed into a big dog; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 115.) March 1998.

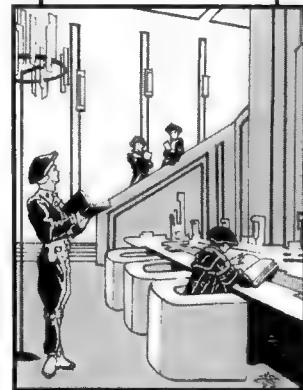
**Chinn, Mike. *The Paladin Mandates*.** Illustrated by Bob Covington. Alchemy Press [46 Oxford Road, Birmingham B27 6DT], ISBN 0-9532260-0-X, 95pp, small-press paperback, cover by Covington, £6 [plus 50p postage inland]. (Horror/fantasy collection, first edition; the author [born 1954] is a fairly well-known British contributor to small magazines, and this volume of six tales about the occult encounters of an Indiana Jones-type adventurer is probably his debut book; it is published by Peter Coleborn, who has set up The Alchemy Press with the assistance of a National Lottery arts grant and intends to publish more books "highlighting new/young writers.") Late entry: 24th January publication, received in February 1998.

**Cross, Ronald Anthony. *The White Guardian: Book Three of The Eternal Guardians*.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85863-9, 427pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) May 1998.

**Danvers, Dennis. *Circuit of Heaven*.** Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-97447-9, 373pp, small-format hardcover, \$14. (Sf novel, first edition; the author [born 1947] is best-known hitherto for his werewolf novel *Wilderness*, which was made into a television serial; this one concerns virtual reality.) February 1998.

**Dean, Pamela. *Juniper, Gennian, & Rosemary*.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86004-8, 350pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Fantasy novel,

## BOOKS RECEIVED



FEBRUARY  
1998

first edition; proof copy received; it's inspired by an old ballad.) June 1998.

**De Lint, Charles. *Someplace to be Flying*.** Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-73280-4, 465pp, hardcover, cover by Fletcher Sibthorpe, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1998; it seems only five minutes since Macmillan issued the last De Lint novel, *Trader* [actually it was in November 1997].) No date shown: received in February 1998.

**Draulans, Dirk. *The Red Queen: A Novel of the War Between the Sexes*.** Translated by Sam Garrett. St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-15636-7, 212pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Sf novel, first published in Belgium as *Rode Koningin*, 1997 [?]; it states "Copyright 1998" on the reverse of the title page, although the accompanying publicity sheet tells us it was published in December 1997; unfortunately the date of the original Flemish publication is not given; about a future female-dominated world, it's pitched to the mainstream reader, and has, the publishers claim, been a "controversial bestseller" in the Low Countries; "This is not science fiction" states the back-cover blurb, which then goes on to evoke Huxley and Orwell; do they do this just to annoy us?; or is the only way to sell books these days to state the exact opposite of the truth?; can the publishers be sued under some U.S. trades-descriptions legislation?; this is a 100%, simon-pure, science-fiction novel.) Late entry: 12th



December 1997 publication, received in February 1998.

Eddings, David and Leigh. **Polgara the Sorceress.**

"The companion novel to *Belgarath the Sorcerer*." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224321-0, 697pp, C-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £11.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1997.) February (?) 1998.

Farland, David. **The Runelords: The Sum of All Men.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86653-4, 479pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; another contender in the BCF stakes [i.e. Big Commercial Fantasy – Locus's useful coinage for what we have sometimes referred to as fantasy tomes] by a new American writer; one can recognize such books not only by their thickness and characteristic cover art [images of swords, horses, etc], but by the generic code-words in their titles – terms like "rune" and "lord" [here the keywords continue thick and fast in the back-cover plot-synopsis: "Prince," "warrior," "land," "Princess," "heir," "throne," "tavern," "assassins," "realm," "King," "Earth," "healed," "reborn"]; J. R. R. Tolkien has a lot to answer for: when is his influence going to begin to wane?; for other typical examples of BCF in this month's listing see under Chris Bunch, David & Leigh Eddings, Robin Hobb, Melanie Rawn, Mickey Zucker Reichert and Kristine Kathryn Rusch.) July 1998.

Foster, Alan Dean. **Slipt.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-77155-6, 265pp, A-format paperback, cover by Leo MacLeod, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1984; eighth Ace Books printing.) March 1998.

Hamilton, Peter F. **The Nano Flower.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86580-5, 480pp, hardcover, cover by Barclay Shaw, \$25.95. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1995; reviewed by James Lovegrove in *Interzone* 98.) 11th February 1998.

Harris, Steve. **Straker's Island.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06582-6, 384pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received.) 4th June 1998.

Hobb, Robin. **Ship of Magic: The Liveship Traders, Book 1.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-

225478-6, xii+656pp, hardcover, cover by John Howe, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1998; the beginning of a new series about living ships, unrelated to the author's previous "Farseer Trilogy" [which was a best-seller]; "Robin Hobb" is a pseudonym for Megan Lindholm.) 16th March 1998.

Hood, Daniel. **Scales of Justice.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00515-2, 297pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bob Eggleton, \$5.50. (Fantasy novel, first edition; it's fourth in a "magical adventure series" of light fantasies; the earlier titles were *Fauilh*, *Wizard's Heir* and *Beggar's Banquet*.) March 1998.

Jones, Diana Wynne. **Minor Arcana.** Vista, ISBN 0-575-60191-4, 287pp, A-format paperback, cover by Peter Mennim, £5.99. (Fantasy collection, first published in 1996.) 19th March 1998.

Jones, Gwyneth. **North Wind.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86396-9, 288pp, trade paperback, \$13.95. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1994; second in the trilogy which began with the highly-praised *White Queen*; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 86.) Late entry: 16th December 1997 publication, received in February 1998.

Kanaly, Michael. **Virus Clans: A Story of Evolution.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00500-4, 312pp, C-format paperback, cover by David S. Rheinhardt, \$12. (Sf novel, first edition; a second novel, following the author's debut effort, *Thoughts of God*, which appeared less than a year ago.) 1st March 1998.

Kreighbaum, Mark. **The Eyes of God: A Novel of the Pinch.** Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-57374-8, 465pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; sequel to *Palace* by Katharine Kerr and Mark Kreighbaum.) 11th May 1998.

Leroux, Lise. **One Hand Clapping.** Viking, ISBN 0-670-87671-2, 341pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Sf novel, first edition; according to an accompanying publicity letter, it's "about a woman in a futuristic London who decides to become a surrogate mother for body parts"; a debut novel by a Canadian-born author

resident in Britain, it's aimed at the mainstream readership and hence is not labelled sf.) 26th February 1998.

MacLeod, Ken. **The Cassini Division.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-603-3, 240pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; the author's third novel.) 7th May 1998.

Marano, Michael. **Dawn Song.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86432-9, 397pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Horror/fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; a debut novel by a new American writer; about a "war in hell," it looks as though it may be theologically based.) June 1998.

Meaney, John. **To Hold Infinity.** Bantam, ISBN 0-553-50588-2, 556pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; a debut book by a new British writer whose short stories have appeared in *Interzone*; it's commended on the cover by Stephen Baxter, Anne McCaffrey and Connie Willis.) 9th April 1998.

Rawn, Melanie. **The Mage-born Traitor: Exiles, Book Two.** Pan, ISBN 0-333-34420-X, 759pp, A-format paperback, cover by Michael Whelan, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1997.) 6th March 1998.

Reichert, Mickey Zucker. **Prince of Demons: The Renshai Chronicles, Volume Two.** Orion/Millennium, ISBN 0-75280-846-X, xii+622pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Crisp, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996; "Mickey Zucker Reichert" is the form of her name used by American doctor and writer Miriam S. Zucker.) 2nd February 1998.

Reimann, Katya. **A Tremor in the Bitter Earth.** "Book 2 of the Tielmaran Chronicles." Tor, ISBN 0-312-86008-0, 381pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; a second novel by a new American writer whose first was *Wind from a Foreign Sky* [1996].) April 1998.

Robinson, Kim Stanley. **Antarctica.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-225393-3, vii+414pp, C-format paperback, cover by

Peter Elson, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1997; the master of California sf, author of the two best trilogies on the subjects of California and Mars, takes on wholly new territory – "the world's last unstripped asset," the great Antarctic continent itself – in his characteristic style of concerned, near-future, ecological sf; reviewed by Ken Brown in *Interzone* 124.) No date shown: received in February 1998.

Rogers, Mark E. **Samurai Cat Goes to Hell.** Illustrated by the author. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86642-9, 317pp, trade paperback, \$13.95. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; sixth, and possibly last, in the series.) June 1998.

Rusch, Kristine Kathryn. **The Resistance: The Fourth Book of the Fey.** Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-57713-1, 519pp, A-format paperback, \$6.50. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) 8th June 1998.

Ryman, Geoff. **253: The Print Remix.** "The acclaimed internet novel." Flamingo, ISBN 0-00-655078-9, 366pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Mainstream novel, by a well-known sf/fantasy writer, which began life on the internet in 1996; first edition in book form; concerning seven-and-a-half minutes' worth of the lives of 253 people aboard a London Underground train one January day in 1995, it comes with cover commendations from *The Independent*, the *New Statesman* and the *L.A. Times* – all presumably referring to the original on-line electronic experience, not this print version; reviewed by Paul Brazier in *Interzone* 130.) February 1998.

Shepard, Lucius. **Barnacle Bill the Spacer and Other Stories.** Millennium, ISBN 0-75281-609-8, 292pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy collection, first published in 1997; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 121.) 16th March 1998.

Shepard, Lucius. **Green Eyes.** Millennium, ISBN 0-75281-613-6, 275pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1984; Shepard's debut novel, and hitherto long out of print in the UK.) 16th March 1998.



**Shepard, Lucius. *Life During Wartime*.** Millennium, ISBN 0-75281-614-4, 438pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf fix-up novel, first published in the USA, 1987; this reissue follows text of the Grafton Books first UK edition of 1988; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 26.) 16th March 1998.

**Simmons, Dan. *Song of Kali*.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86583-X, 311pp, trade paperback, \$13.95. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1985; this was Simmons's debut novel, and won the World Fantasy Award.) 10th February 1998.

**Somtow, S. P. *Darker Angels*.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85931-7, 384pp, hardcover, cover by Amy Grigg, \$24.95. (Historical horror novel, first published in the UK, 1997; reviewed by David Mathew in

**Allen, Roger MacBride. *Isaac Asimov's Inferno*.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00514-4, xiii+304pp, A-format paperback, cover by Ralph McQuarrie, \$5.99. (Sharecrop sf novel, first published in the USA, 1994; a "Byron Preiss Visual Publications, Inc." package, and second in the series inspired by Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics.) March 1998.

**Allston, Aaron. *Wraith Squadron: X-Wing, Book Five*.** "Star Wars." Bantam, ISBN 0-553-50599-8, 403pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Youll, £5.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1998.) 12th March 1998.

**Anderson, Kevin J. *Antibodies*.** "The X-Files." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648252-X, 277pp, A-format paperback, cover by Tony Mauro, £5.99. (Sf/horror TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1997; based on the characters created by writer-producer Chris Carter, this is the fifth "X-Files" adult novel – the first two, *Goblins* and *Whirlwind*, were by Charles Grant, and the second two, *Ground Zero* and *Ruins*, were by Anderson.) 16th March 1998.

**Cherryh, C. J. *Lois & Clark: A Superman Novel*.** Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-1163-3, 283pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff

*Interzone* 128.) 13th February 1998.

**Tarr, Judith. *White Mare's Daughter*.** Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-86112-5, 494pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Prehistorical novel, first edition; proof copy received; this looks to be interesting – a work right on the cusp where "prehistoric sf" turns into straight historical fiction, it's about the ancient horse-loving Indo-Europeans, circa 4,500 BC, and their encounter with a pre-Mesopotamian city culture; as with Tarr's earlier novels about ancient Egypt, it's not immediately clear whether there is any fantasy content.) June 1998.

**Tessier, Thomas. *Fog Heart*.** Vista, ISBN 0-575-60250-3, 319pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1997; reviewed by

Chris Morgan in *Interzone* 120.) 9th March 1998.

**Van Vogt, A. E. *Slan*.** Tor/Orb, ISBN 0-312-85236-3, 255pp, trade paperback, \$12.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1945; the cover artist is not credited, but it looks as though it may be an original 1940s Astounding cover painting by Hubert Rogers; one of the creakier classics of the Golden Age of American sf, and once tremendously popular on both sides of the Atlantic, does this reissue signal the beginning of an attempted revival in van Vogt's fortunes?) 12th March 1998.

**Williams, Tad. *Otherland, Volume One: City of Golden Shadow*.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-604-1, xiii+943pp, A-format paperback, cover by Michael Whelan, £6.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in 1996; only

the series title is mentioned on cover and spine; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 119.) 5th March 1998.

**Wolfe, Chris Anne. *Fires of Aggar*.** New Victoria, ISBN 0-934678-58-8, 281pp, trade paperback, cover by Ginger Brown, £7.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1994; sequel to *Shadows of Aggar*, which was listed here last month; the author died in 1997, having produced four novels and many stories [probably all small-press]; "New Victoria" is presumably an outfit related to Pride Publications, which specializes in fiction of gay and lesbian interest; this is the American fifth printing of 1998 with a British price added; it's distributed in the UK by Turnaround, Unit 3, Olympia Trading Estate, Coburg Rd., London N22 6TZ.) 5th March 1998.

series created by J. Michael Straczynski, it contains eight pages of colour photographs.) 20th February 1998.

**Killick, Jane. *Babylon 5 Season by Season, 4: No Surrender, No Retreat*.** Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-2249-X, 183pp, B-format paperback, £7.99. (Sf TV-series history and companion, first edition; covering the fourth season of the series, it also contains eight pages of colour photographs.) 20th February 1998.

**Perry, Steve. *Target Earth*.** "Leonard Nimoy's Primortals." Bantam, ISBN 0-553-50668-8, 288pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf comic-book spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1997; first in a series "created by Leonard Nimoy with concepts by Isaac Asimov" and originally issued in comic-book form by BIG Entertainment, Inc. [who are the copyright holders], it concerns the return to Earth of the descendants of an intelligent dinosaur species rescued by aliens from impending disaster 65 million years ago.) 12th March 1998.

**Stone, Dave. *Oblivion*.** "The New Adventures." Virgin, ISBN 0-426-20522-7, 244pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jon Sullivan, £5.99. (Shared-universe sf novel, first edition; it begins with a long quotation from Shakespeare.) 19th March 1998.

## Spinoffery

*This is a list of all books received that fall into those sub-types of sf, fantasy and horror which may be termed novelizations, recursive fictions, spinoffs, sequels by other hands, shared worlds and sharecrops (including non-fiction about shared worlds, films and TV, etc.). The collective term "Spinoffery" is used for the sake of brevity.*

novel, first published in the USA, 1996; yes, that's right – multi-Hugo Award-winner C. J. Cherryh is now writing TV spinoffery.) 20th February 1998.

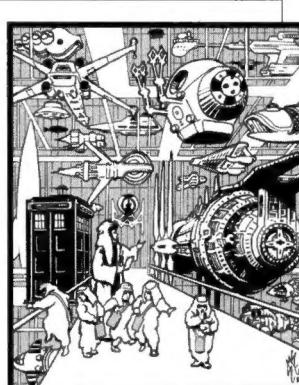
**Crispin, A. C., and Ru Emerson. *Voices of Chaos: A Novel of StarBridge*.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00516-0, 316pp, A-format paperback, cover by Duane O. Myers, \$5.99. (Shared-universe sf novel, first edition; the latest in an ongoing *Star Trek*-lookalike series which seems to have been initiated by Crispin and is perhaps aimed at "young adults"; Ru Emerson probably did all the writing here.) March 1998.

**Furey, Maggie. *Sorceress*.** "The Web." Orion/Dolphin, ISBN 1-85881-551-7, 98pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fangorn, £3.50. (Juvenile shared-world sf novel, first edition; it follows books in the same series by Stephen Bax-

ter, Stephen Bowkett, Eric Brown and Graham Joyce.) 9th February 1998.

**Hamilton, Peter F. *Light-Storm*.** "The Web." Orion/Dolphin, ISBN 1-85881-550-9, 87pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fangorn, £3.50. (Juvenile shared-world sf novel, first edition; according to the accompanying publicity letter, Peter F. Hamilton is now "Britain's foremost SF writer"; really? – we thought that was Stephen Baxter, or Brian Aldiss, or Arthur C. Clarke, or somebody ... congratulations, Peter!) 9th February 1998.

**Killick, Jane. *Babylon 5 Season by Season, 3: Point of No Return*.** Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-2318-6, 182pp, B-format paperback, £7.99. (Sf TV-series history and companion, first edition; covering the third season of the Warner Bros. TV



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**HARM'S WAY** – "What if Charles Dickens had written a space opera?" (*Locus*) – large paperback, £3.50. *The Hour of the Thin Ox and Other Voices*, paperbacks, £1.50 each. Prices include postage. Colin Greenland, 98 Sturton St., Cambridge CB1 2QA

**BARRINGTON BAYLEY:** trade paperback editions of *Empire of Two Worlds*, *Annihilation Factor* (novels) and *Seed of Evil* (collection), £5 each (inland, inc. p&p), signed and personalized, from 48 Turreff Avenue, Telford, Shropshire TF2 8HE.

**BOOKS – MAIL ORDER.** Orbital Trading Post: the planet's largest on-line SF/F bookshop at <http://www.sf-fantasy.com/otp.htm> – up to 40% off RRP!

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**HUGO AWARD**-winning *Science Fiction Chronicle*, published since 1979, has all the news of US and UK publishing, plus reviews, interviews, forthcoming books, much, much more. Sample copy £3.50, subscription 12/£29 airmail from Algol Press, c/o R. Hansen, 144 Plashet Grove, E. Ham, London E6 1AB.

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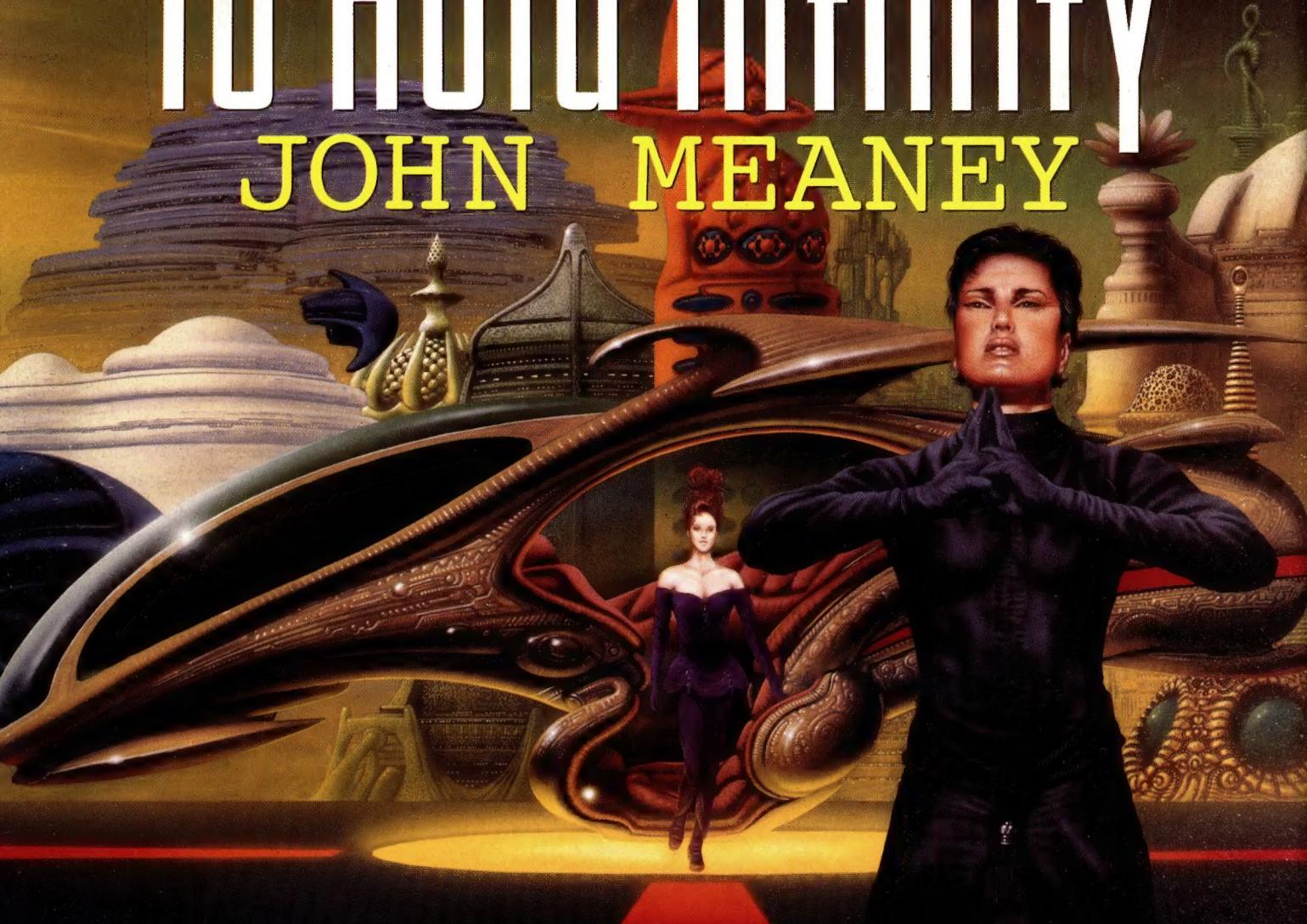
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